

The Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development

ASSESSEMENT OF REFORM IN EDUCATION SYSTEM

Sociology Research Paper

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Assesment of Reform in Education System

Introduction

(Description of the research and sampling)

In 2008, in the framework of the project “Improving Environment for Minority Integration in Georgia through Supporting Reforms in the School Education System”, the Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development (CIPDD) carried out a sociological research to identify and assess public attitudes towards the ongoing education reforms. Although the research focused on the secondary education reform, problems of higher education, namely the university admission exams, were addressed – in the general context of reforms – as well. The main component of the research methodology was a qualitative survey that applied two instruments – extensive interviews and focus-group discussions – designed to identify respondents’ attitudes and opinions on different reform-related problems. The sampling was based on a random selection of school staff (incumbent and acting teachers and directors), members of school boards, personnel of resource-centres, parents, pupils, and – in some cases – members of NGOs, officials of local governments, and other social groups. In all, 90 interviews and 15 focus-group discussions, with approximately 8-10 respondents in each, were conducted in the framework of the research. About 230 respondents from different age groups, mostly women (as female staff dominate the national education system), were interviewed during the research. Most of the respondents (except pupils) were from the 35-60 age group. The research was carried out in randomly selected towns and villages in four target regions: Ajaria, Imereti, Kvemo Kartli, and Samtskhe-Javakheti (the last two regions are homes to Azeri and Armenian ethnic enclaves respectively). This type of sampling was chosen to analyse and compare the effect of different variables on the respondents’ attitudes towards various reform-related problems, for instance the difference in attitudes by region, by school (Georgian and non-Georgian: Armenian, Azeri, Russian), by residence (urban or rural), etc.

The research was structured to identify distinct characteristics of the respondents’ attitudes (cognitive, emotional or behavioural), i.e. the respondents’ awareness of the reform, their attitudes to the reform in general and to each of its specific components, and their involvement (or readiness to participate) in the implementation of reform.

The main themes of the interviews and focus-group discussions:

- Ongoing education reform – timeliness, relevance and efficiency
- National matriculation exams
- Functions and activities of school boards
- Functions and efficiency of resource centres
- Problems of ethnic minorities related to the education reform
- Problems related to the teaching of Georgian as a second language in non-Georgian schools
- National language education policy (bilingual education, etc)
- Tavtavi – the Georgian language textbook for non-Georgian schools
- Problems related to the teaching of the history of religions in school
- Qualification/certification of school directors
- Qualification/certification of school teachers and teacher professional development programs
- The voucher-based school funding system
- The secondary education reform – timeliness, relevance and efficiency
- Optimisation of schools
- School textbooks
- Educational programs and methodologies
- Integrated teaching&learning/Unified subjects
- The trimester system of education
- The 10-credit assessment of pupil achievement
- The 12-year mandatory secondary education, etc.

To begin with, it is important to note that the level of awareness of virtually every research theme varied greatly among the respondents, even among those of them who were either employees or partners of an educational institution. The respondents also varied greatly in how they assessed one and the same research theme and to what extent they were ready to participate in the reform. The respondents came up with a wide range of comments on every component of the reform – from positive to negative and neutral. The national matriculation exams were the only exception from this pattern – nearly all respondents assessed them positively.

1. Assessment of the ongoing education reform – timeliness, relevance and efficiency

As mentioned above, the research aimed to identify public attitude towards each component of the education reform and the reform process in general. That is why at the start of every interview and focus-group discussion, before analysing separate components of the reform in depth, respondents were asked about their opinion on the reform in general and requested to specify impulsively, without a second thought, its pros and cons. More exactly, they were required to name two positive and two negative aspects of the reform. Besides, the respondents were asked whether the education reform was timely, necessary and efficient. The first questions were followed by interactive dialogue between interviewers and respondents on the above specified themes and problems. The respondents' general assessment of reform (whether it was timely, relevant, efficient, etc) and their impulsive (positive/negative) answers to the questions about separate components of the reform, as well as discussion over every question of the interviews, represent a qualitative evaluation and are presented as approximate variations. Respectively, the following terms are applied in the report: "a majority", "a large number", "a small number", etc.

Before examining other issues, it would be useful to look into the respondents' awareness about the reform. All respondents said they knew that the education reform was under way in the country. However, their answers about specific components and aspects of the reform process varied greatly. Personnel of resource centres and school directors appeared better informed than other respondents, for instance teachers and parents, though there were some marked differences in their qualification and experience. Sometimes, they gave formal assessment in their answers (maybe because they thought that they should praise the government's policy in this field in any case due to their official position). But some respondents showed comprehensive, well-thought-out and critical attitudes. In comparison with other respondents, quite expectedly, teachers displayed better knowledge of teaching-related problems. Members of school boards varied greatly in their answers about functions and responsibilities of the boards. Many of them could not specify their responsibilities and describe how the school boards are elected. Some respondents even did not know that they were members of a school board. It seems that in schools where activity of the board is largely formal, the level of participation and interest in the education process, as well as awareness of the reform, is rather low. Similar correlation, which will be described in detail below, was found in the assessment of other components.

The general assessment of reform focused on two main factors – timeliness and efficiency.

1.1. Was the reform really necessary?

Despite the differences in their awareness of the reform, a majority of the respondents assessed the education reform as timely and indispensable. Supporters of the reform argue that the reform was necessitated by new challenges – regarding both the education process and relationships – facing the national education system in the changing world. Part of them even advocated coercive measures to enforce the reform, which was, in their words, too essential.

"I think the reform was absolutely necessary. Life goes on and we must keep pace with change. Generally speaking, the reform proved beneficial for children. The problem is that personnel of

schools, i.e. those who are supposed to implement the reform, are stuck in a groove, as their mentality has not changed. Moses herded his people up and down the desert until all slaves died out. Our case is the same” (Interview with a representative of a resource-centre).

In the words of many proponents of the change, the basic idea of the reform is good, but its implementation is inconsistent, incorrect and problematic. Some of them doubt that the reforms will be successfully completed, acknowledging, though, that changes are timely and necessary.

A relatively small number of the respondents argued that the former Soviet education system was not bad (“It was quite good”, “It used to ensure high quality of education”, “It was normal”). In their opinion, the government should have simply adapted some of its components to modern requirements instead of rejecting it outright. Education systems need to be reformed gradually, step-by-step, as “shock therapy” measures are fatal for them, they said.

A small number of the respondents negatively assessed both the basic idea of the reform and its implementation process.

“I still don’t have a clear understanding of where the reform is heading” (Interview with a teacher from Imereti)

A small number of the respondents, more passive than the others, did not have a clear stance on the education reform. Just like in other spheres, in their opinion, the government should have a free hand in reforming the education system and the reform should be accepted without any objections.

A small number of the respondents appeared indifferent to the education reform, even though they must be concerned as citizens and/or parents.

“To tell the truth, I’m not interested in the reform and rarely watch TV programmes about this problem” (Interview with a parent, ethnic Georgian, from Kvemo Kartli)

Supporters of the reform, as well as a relatively small group of the opponents, included all categories of the respondents (male-female, urban-rural residence, Georgian-non-Georgian, etc.).

1.2. Efficiency of the reform

Respondents gave different opinions regarding the efficiency of the education reform – from sharply positive to sharply negative. But moderately critical views were prevalent. Most of the respondents said the education reform had both positive and negative aspects. They pointed out that the process had serious shortcomings and even faults, and elaborated on the reasons of the defects. In their opinion, the reform is more or less efficient. A majority of the respondents, both proponents and opponents of the reform, made quite a few critical remarks about the implementation of reform.

“Great idea, bad implementation – that is the education reform” (Interview with a parent from Kvemo Kartli).

Only a small number of the respondents thought that all components of the education reform were efficient and successful.

“I cannot but praise the education reform. Georgia has successfully coped with the problem” (Interview with a representative of a resource centre).

“On the whole, the reform is quite successful. It has more positive aspects than negative ones. Rapid changes always lead to minor mistakes – it’s natural” (Interview with a member of a school board, Ajaria).

A small number of the respondents assessed the education reform negatively. In their opinion, the reform had a negative impact on the education process in schools.

“The reform is both inefficient and ineffective. They use us as guinea pigs in their experiments every year” (Interview with an acting school director from Kvemo Kartli).

“As a parent, I don’t see any improvement. Quite the contrary, the situation has obviously worsened – the quality of education in schools has declined” (Focus-group discussion, a parent from Ajaria).

As mentioned above, a large number of the respondents that backed the changes displayed critical attitude towards the reform, highlighting both positive and negative aspects of the process. Citing specific examples, they pointed out shortcomings and mistakes of the reform.

“This reform has both pros and cons. It has failed to achieve all its goals. For instance, the idea of the voucher-based funding system is good, but it does not work in practice. As a result, while some schools are quite well off, others are starved of cash. Although the reform showed that fluency in Georgian was essential, the government did nothing to improve conditions for the learning of Georgian” (Interview with a schoolteacher from a Russian school of Javakheti).

A large number of the supporters of the reform were certain that albeit timely and necessary, the reform was ill-planned and ill-conceived. They described it as a spontaneous, touch-and-go process.

“The reform is timely and necessary, but its implementation is spontaneous and its requirements are constantly changing. At first, for instance, we were told to revise and maintain attendance/attainment sheets. Afterwards, they said it was quite enough simply to take notes. It is the case with regard to almost every other problem. Such approach does more harm than good” (Interview with a teacher of an Azeri school of Kvemo Kartli).

Even those respondents that backed the idea of the reform voiced doubts about its feasibility. In their opinion, the reform is inefficient, does not work in practice, and remains largely formal.

“Reforms are needed in every sphere, including the national education system. However, all hitherto implemented education reforms – there have been four of them to date – were incomplete. Every new minister began the process from scratch” (Interview with an acting school director from Ajaria).

“I’m in favour of the reform, but no practical results have been achieved so far – all changes have been largely formal and in reality everything remains unchanged” (Interview with a teacher from Kvemo Kartli).

“The reform is really necessary, but in a sense it is nothing else than self-deception” (Interview with a teacher from Samtskhe-Javakheti).

Respondents specified various factors, which they thought had been either overlooked or misused. Just for this reason, in their opinion, the reform has been largely ineffective and inefficient. These factors include the legislative, material, and technical base and the pace of reform. Firstly, in their words, schools – key subjects of the reform – lack human (trained and experienced personnel), material and technical resources to implement the reform efficiently. Secondly, the reform is carried out in a hurry – hence negative effects of the process.

“The reform is necessary, as everything needs to be changed. The question is how to implement it properly: from bottom to top or from top to bottom? There are too many innovations for teachers that make them confused. Only a few teachers managed to cope. It will take some time before the new methods and standards gain a foothold. The reform should have been carried out gradually, step by step, and slowly” (Interview with an acting school director of an Azeri school of Kvemo Kartli).

There are also some psychological problems. School communities are not prepared for the new relations and independence, still waiting – by inertia – for instructions and orders from the centre.

The climate of fear and submission to authority is still widespread, preventing the creation of an environment for healthy competition.

“The system has been decentralised and resource-centres were set up. Schools are independent now. All these reforms are positive. But there is a lack of competence – school personnel lacked qualification and appeared ill prepared for managing school funds and making decisions independently. They were used to being told what and how to do by the government. Even today they keep asking why there is no control any longer and why schools are not inspected by authorities any more” (Interview with a representative of a resource centre, Ajaria).

Part of the respondents questioned competence and credibility of the policy makers, managers and decision-makers of the reform. In their words, the reform was inefficient because it was planned and implemented by incompetent and unprofessional people. They blamed the Ministry of Education and Science for inability to administer the reform process as required and failure to train school personnel in advance to prepare them for the reform and collect/analyse respective feedback.

“The reform proved ineffective and unsuccessful, and produced a lot of negative results. Education authorities seem to be lacking skills and knowledge to implement the reform efficiently. It seems also that the reform was ill planned” (Focus-group discussion, a teacher from Ajaria).

“These processes do not seem to have been adequately regulated by the ministry. Implementation of the reform on the ground has not been consistent and efficient, as schools know little about their rights and responsibilities in the new conditions” (Interview with a representative of an NGO, Imereti).

Some respondents voiced doubts about the usefulness and efficiency of the new education methodologies and approaches adopted in Georgia on the basis of foreign experience. In their opinion, experience of foreign countries is irrelevant to the Georgian reality. They argued that the reform was inefficient mainly because local cadre – school personnel – were not given a voice in the planning and decision-making. A large number of the respondents suggested that the reform should have been a bottom-to-top process rather than visa versa, i.e. it should have been initiated by schools, not the ministry. Besides, in their words, the reform should have been implemented in a coherent way, i.e. in all grades simultaneously. They criticised the decision to select pilot classes for the reform only at several, randomly selected levels, namely Grades I, VII and X.

“The reform should have proceeded from bottom to top, as schools know their needs better and school teachers, including those from remote rural areas, should have been involved in the process. It was not good that the reform began at the top and was patterned on foreign concepts” (Interview with a teacher of a Georgian school, Kvemo Kartli).

“Teachers should have been re-trained in advance, before the reform began. And the process should have started at Grade I, not Grades VII and X. The strategy and the plan of the reform are unknown to me. But they had better ask us what we think about it. I think it is unacceptable” (Interview with a teacher of a Russian school, Kvemo Kartli).

The respondents blamed the architects of the reform for failing to take account of the specifics of different regions and different schools, the differences between urban and rural schools, and many other factors.

Part of the respondents from non-Georgian schools emphasised that the reforms were harder to implement in their schools than in Georgian ones. In their words, non-Georgian schools have great difficulty adapting to the accelerated pace of reform. Special information and training programs should have been implemented in non-Georgian schools to help them prepare for the reform, the respondents said.

2. National matriculation exams and higher education

2.1. Assessment of the national matriculation exams

As mentioned above, at the start of every interview and focus-group discussion, before analysing separate components of the reform in depth, respondents were asked about their opinion on the reform in general and requested to specify impulsively, without a second thought, its pros and cons. The national matriculation exams – integrated standardised tests to qualify for admission into the country's higher educational institutions – were introduced in 2005 and represent in fact the only component of the reform to be nearly unanimously praised by the respondents as highly successful. When asked to specify positive results of the education reform, most of the respondents usually pointed out the national matriculation exams in the first place. They credited the new system of university entry exams with ensuring fair admission, eliminating corruption, and providing equal higher education opportunities for all citizens of the country regardless of their social and ethnic background. In the respondents' opinion, no other component of the reform has been as efficient as this one and no other element of the national education system has improved as much as the system of admission exams did.

“One of the positive effects of the reform is that youths can now demonstrate their potential in full. First and foremost, it is important that they can rest assured now that their knowledge will not be overlooked and will be assessed impartially. As to the secondary education system, I think it needs serious reforms” (Interview with a representative of a local government, Imereti).

“The most positive result of the reform is the national matriculation exams, which helped root out corruption. It is very important. Getting into a university through the back door, by paying bribes or pulling strings, is not a good thing for the country” (Interview with a parent, Samtskhe).

“Everybody are happy with the national matriculation exams. All other components need to be advanced and improved” (Interview with a representative of a resource centre, Ajaria).

“The national matriculation exams are maybe the best and brightest achievement of the education reform, which has given youths a chance to enter university by knowledge, not by bribes or nepotism” (Interview with a representative of a resource centre, Imereti).

Part of the respondents assessed the national matriculation exams as the most significant and positive change for the entire country, not only for the national education system.

“The most successful and important reform in the country is the national matriculation exams” (Interview with a teacher, Imereti).

Some respondents claimed that the fair and standardised entry exams increased the quality of education in the country.

Respondents from minority groups also praised this component of the education reform, though not without complaining that the new examination system created problems for non-Georgian youths seeking higher education. Namely, in their words, the Georgian language exam, which is mandatory for all applicants, has put non-Georgian youths, who do not speak Georgian well enough, at a disadvantage. But their criticism was not caused by the reform itself – they were unhappy that the new system was enforced at short notice, without giving ethnic minorities enough time and opportunities to learn the language.

Although the reform was generally welcomed by the respondents, some elements of the examination process – for instance, the choice of subjects for the tests, funding problems, etc – were criticised (the reform of the higher education system was not among the themes of the research; the respondents were asked questions only about the new examination system; that is why their opinions on the higher education reform are not included in the report).

2.2. Basic Skills Test/Financial problems

The respondents paid close attention to one of the components of the national matriculation exams, Basic Skills Test (BST). Just BST results determine eligibility for the state scholarship. The respondents discussed two aspects of the issue they thought were most important: why the BST was significant and whether the state scholarships should be linked to its results. A large number of the respondents positively evaluated the BST. In their words, the test is quite important and the link between its results and the state funding is well justified. A small number of the respondents expressed the opposite view: they criticised the BST and said the availability of state scholarships should not depend on its results. Some respondents proposed to abolish the BST on the grounds that there was no “Basic Skills” subject in the school curriculum. Some others, including school directors, argued that as long as the BST was part of the university admission exams, the “Basic Skills” should be taught in school (unfortunately, part of the respondents failed to understand that “Basic Skills” cannot be a separate subject in the school curriculum because it represents only a pupil’s ability to think and argue logically, something children can develop only by learning different subjects).

A small number of the respondents thought that it was inappropriate to decide eligibility for the state scholarships on the basis of BST results. In their opinion, it should depend on the results of all tests, not only BST.

2.3. Education fees

Part of the respondents worried over education fees. In their opinion, the fees were too high and unaffordable for a majority of the population. While the new system of entry exams is just and fair, creating equal opportunities for all seekers of higher education, the high education fees actually “discriminate” against youths from low-income families. Many families have no money to pay for their children’s education and accommodation in another city. It was emphasised that quite a few students were forced to drop out because they were unable to pay the education fees. In the respondents’ opinion, education must be free of charge, just like it used to be in Soviet times. The government should either cover the cost of education in full or at least discount the fees for students from low-income families, part of the respondents suggested, arguing that high education fees could hamper the country’s development.

“It’s wrong to charge students for education. In my time education was free. I’ll be unable to pay fees for my son’s education, if he enters a commercial university. That is why I like the good old days, the Soviet time, when education was free of charge” (Interview with a parent, Ajaria).

2.4. The examination program and form – the tests

Part of the respondents believed that the examination program, i.e. the list of mandatory tests, was irrelevant to and inconsistent with university educational programs. Some faculties require the knowledge of specific subjects but these last are absent in the examination program. Teachers of natural sciences are unhappy at the lack of attention to their subjects – only a few Georgian universities require admission applicants to pass respective tests. In their opinion, exams in natural sciences are justified and relevant in all cases, even if they are unrelated to the subjects of study in a university (in other words, for instance, the biology exam must be mandatory not only for medical universities; not only history faculties should require the history exam, etc), as they can ensure “high quality of general education”.

According to the respondents, limiting mandatory tests only to several subjects or making some subjects optional affects the quality of education in school – pupils simply ignore the subjects that are not listed in the examination program.

A large number of the respondents pointed out that they liked the format of examination – standardised tests – because it guaranteed fair assessment of the applicants’ skills and knowledge. A small number of the respondents suggested that written tests were not enough, as they could not assess “verbal skills” of the applicants, and should be supplemented with orals.

“The orals are useful. Imagine a young man with good writing skills. He can complete written tests successfully and qualify for admission to a pedagogic university, even though he may have poor oral communication skills” (Interview with a teacher of German, a school board member, Imereti).

2.5. The correspondence between the examination program and the school curriculum

Part of the teachers and parents complained that the program of admission exams did not correspond with the school curriculum and school textbooks. As a result, pupils are unable to prepare for the exams adequately. Some parents were angry at being forced to hire private tutors for their children because the school was unable to provide the knowledge the children needed for the exams.

“I like the national matriculation exams very much. It means that there is now at least one opportunity in the country to get fair treatment at last. But the knowledge my children are going to get in school is not enough to pass the exams successfully. That is why I have to resort to private tuition. It is also unclear which textbooks will be used to select questions for the exams” (Focus group discussion, a teacher, a parent, Ajaria).

2.6. Problems related to the poor Georgian proficiency/Georgian language test

A majority of the respondents from Imereti and Ajaria represented Georgian schools. Respectively, their views reflected problems of Georgian schools. In Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli (homes to Armenian and Azeri ethnic enclaves) the research was naturally focused on problems of non-Georgian schools and opinions of their representatives. Access to higher education for ethnic minorities is a prime concern of local residents. According to available statistical data and the respondents’ opinions, the number of students from minority groups (except ethnic minorities of Tbilisi who have always spoken Georgian fluently and, respectively, have had few language-related problems in getting admission to Georgian universities) has dropped dramatically in Georgian universities in post-Soviet and pre-reform (before 2005) times, mainly due to poor knowledge of Georgian, the country’s official language. In Soviet times and before the reform youths from minority groups used to study in Russian-speaking departments of Georgian universities and, respectively, were not required to speak Georgian fluently. Today the Georgian language test is mandatory for getting admission to a Georgian university. However, a large number of the youths from ethnic enclaves of the country do not speak Georgian and, therefore, prefer to seek higher education in Armenia, Azerbaijan, or Russia or, rarely, in Europe.

Opinions of Georgian and non-Georgian respondents on this problem differed. A large number of the Georgian respondents said that non-Georgian school leavers should not be given any privileges. Admission requirements, including the Georgian language test, must be the same for Georgian and non-Georgian applicants, they emphasised.

“Everybody must be on an equal footing with one another. Nobody should have any privileges, no matter what ethnic background they have – Azeri or other” (Interview with a teacher, ethnic Georgian, Kvemo Kartli).

Part of the Georgian respondents had no idea how non-Georgian applicants were coping with the national matriculation exams and what was the exam language for them.

“I don’t know what problems Armenians and Azeri are facing in this respect. I have no idea whether they sit the exams in Georgian or other language” (Interview with a parent, Kvemo Kartli).

Some people – parents and teachers alike – remain confident that Georgian universities still have Russian-speaking or Azeri-speaking departments and, respectively, poor fluency in Georgian is not a problem. Part of the respondents appeared unaware that Pushkin State University had been

disbanded and incorporated into Ilia Chavchavadze State University and that its Azeri-speaking department was closed.

“Language is not a problem. Although they do not speak Georgian well enough, they will be able to enrol and study in Azeri-speaking and Russian-speaking departments of Pushkin University” (Interview with a teacher, Georgian school, Kvemo Kartli).

Representatives of minority groups – ethnic Armenians, Azeri, and Russians – positively evaluated the concept of national matriculation exams as an example of fair approach. At the same time, however, they complained that the exams created serious obstacles to them, as their knowledge of Georgian was minimal, to say the least. In their words, it is very important that Basic Skills Test was translated into their native languages (at present applicants can choose whatever language they like to take the BST: Armenian, Azeri, Georgian, or Russian). Having positively assessed the national matriculation exams, the respondents at the same time criticised the Georgian government for doing little to improve the Georgian language teaching in non-Georgian schools. In their words, youths from minority groups are willing to learn Georgian but have few opportunities to do so.

“They carried out the reform and now want pupils to speak Georgian. But the language is not taught in school efficiently. In some villages there are no teachers of Georgian at all. What can children do in such circumstances?” (Focus group discussion, parent, Armenian school, Samtskhe-Javakheti).

Some respondents suggested that non-Georgian school leavers should be given privileges at the exams until Georgian was taught efficiently enough in non-Georgian schools. They also proposed to simplify the Georgian language test for non-Georgian applicants. A small number of the respondents argued that it would be better to abolish the Georgian language test and include advanced study of Georgian into the university curriculum.

2.7. The number of select faculties

Almost all respondents approved of the new examination principle – the opportunity to choose several preferable faculties prior to the exams. In their opinion, this measure can increase chances of admission (before the exams every applicant is required to fill a special form and specify seven most preferable faculties in different Georgian universities). At the same time, however, the respondents differed over the number of select faculties. Most of them were satisfied that there was a possibility to choose seven most preferable faculties. But others disagreed – as a result of this measure, in their words, youths can unwittingly end up studying a speciality they don’t like very much. Part of the respondents suggested that the number of select faculties should be limited to three or five.

2.8. Higher education accreditation

According to part of the respondents, school leavers and their parents – mainly from remote rural communities or ethnic enclaves – are often “cheated” by some unaccredited higher educational institutions offering them exam-free admission. But diplomas issued by such institutions are not equal to those of accredited universities. It means that students of unaccredited universities pay education fees to get just a “piece of paper”, not real diploma. The respondents said it was up to the education ministry to regulate this aspect. Namely, in their opinion, unaccredited universities should be banned to admit students. “By enabling these universities to enrol students, the ministry is deceiving itself and lets them deceive other people” – they said.

It can be concluded that the system of admission to higher educational institutions is generally acceptable for all categories of respondents. Most of the respondents positively assessed the system, albeit with some reservations. Poor knowledge of Georgian – and respectively low access of minorities to higher education – was identified as one of the most serious problems.

3. School boards/Collective management of schools

3.1. Decentralisation of schools and creation of school boards

A large number of the respondents positively assessed decentralisation of schools. In their opinion, after schools were re-registered as independent legal entities and became autonomous with enhanced rights (that enabled them to carry out independent financial management, to elect school directors from candidates nominated by the Ministry of Education and Science, to select textbooks for the education process on their own, etc) they will become more efficient and competitive. A relatively small number of the respondents favoured the old, centralised system, in which the ministry was solely in charge of the education system, enforcing standard rules on all schools of the country.

In the respondents' opinion, creation of school boards significantly contributed to the decentralisation and collective management of schools. A majority of the respondents positively evaluated creation of school boards, though their opinions on current activities of school boards differed widely.

The following data was supposed to be gathered during the research in relation to school boards: what respondents know about school boards, how they evaluate functions of school boards, how board members are elected, who is and must be eligible to become a board member, how school boards implement their functions in real life, what problems school boards are responsible to deal with and how efficiently they solve them, etc. Respondents were asked whether boards in their schools were really functional – in case of the negative answer, respective reasons must have been specified – and whether they were involved in activities of school boards themselves. Respondents were also asked to provide examples of success stories and failures, real and formal (“window-dressing”) activities of their school boards.

3.2. What respondents know about school boards

A majority of the respondents were aware that a board was elected in their school but had limited knowledge of its functions and responsibilities. Elections of school directors played a vital role in publicising the school boards. Candidates for the position of school director were required to pass qualification exams in 2007. Afterwards, school boards elected directors from successful candidates. Since the people kept a close eye on the process, school boards and their activities came to light and became widely known. However, few respondents had detailed knowledge of the functions of school boards. Generally, school directors and board members are better informed about specific functions of school boards. A majority of the respondents said that they did not fully understand all functions of school boards. For instance, one of the members of a school board, a parent, was unable to specify the correct number of board members – how many parents and how many teachers are in a board. A majority of the respondents knew that one board member was a pupil. Despite limited knowledge, a majority of the respondents did not hesitate to evaluate activities of school boards.

It is noteworthy that a small number of the respondents (including one board member) knew nothing about school boards and their functions.

3.3. Functions of school boards

Part of the respondents said the main function of a school board was to elect the director, manage school funds together with the director and “oversee” the director’s activities. In their opinion, the “oversight” was vital for “prevention of corruption”. Another part of the respondents added that school boards could recommend directors alternative solutions to problems. Besides, school boards should participate in school planning and management. A large number of the respondents, including board members, could not specify main functions of a school board. Many of them used general phrases, without going into detail.

“Functions and responsibilities are very wide-ranging. No problem can be solved without us. We closely cooperate with the school administration in every issue related to the schooling process and we want to contribute to the better future of the school. We do our best” (Focus group discussion, a parent, Imereti).

Part of the respondents were aware that boards were elected in schools but failed to specify their functions and responsibilities.

“I don’t know exactly what functions school boards have to perform. I don’t remember how they were elected” (Interview with a parent, Ajaria).

A small number of the respondents could not answer the question “What is school board?” It may be assumed that in some schools boards do not function at all, either really or formally.

“What is school board? I have no idea” (Interview with a teacher, ethnic Azeri, Kvemo Kartli).

“I would like to consult the director before answering this question” (Interview with a teacher, Samtskhe-Javakheti).

3.4. School board membership: the quantitative and qualitative composition

A small number of the respondents gave correct answers to the questions about quantitative and qualitative composition of school boards. A large number of the respondents were unable to answer correctly and specified approximate data. According to representatives of resource-centres, schools themselves are to blame for knowing little about this and other issues because they do not seem interested in school autonomy and self-government.

“Those interested in functions of school boards know them well enough. A lot of materials are available about this theme. Those who are interested know their functions perfectly. Those who are not, will never understand them” (Interview with a representative of a resource centre).

3.5. Attitudes towards the underlying idea behind the creation of school boards: are school boards acceptable and necessary?

Part of the respondents – those who were more or less aware of the functions and responsibilities of school boards – approved of the creation of school boards and said they were quite acceptable and necessary. In their words, just this institution should ensure independent and democratic school governance. For a large number of the respondents the most important aspect was just the fact that school boards represented a collective governance mechanism.

“Creation of school boards was a step in the right direction. Such a structure was really necessary – several heads are better than one. I like that they are empowered to elect a school director. School funds are managed jointly by the administration of a school and its board” (Interview with a teacher, Imereti).

A large number of the respondents said that school boards were not necessary. In their opinion, there is no real need for school boards and they were created only because the government wanted to do so.

“My opinion about school boards is very negative. I don’t like their functions, for instance elections of school directors. Which method is better – election of a school director by the entire school or by a six-member board, which includes three parents, two teachers, and one pupil? Nobody should be elected director without backing of the school’s teachers. School funds are managed by a school board, while the rest of the school personnel have no voice in the process. They are not necessary at all” (Interview with a representative of a resource centre).

Quite a few respondents, including teachers, board members and representatives of resource-centres, proposed to abolish school boards. In their opinion, teachers' and parents' boards used to manage school affairs quite efficiently and the new boards are simply redundant.

“School boards must be abolished. They are unnecessary, extra burden on schools. School boards are obedient servants of directors and just follow their orders and instructions” (Interview with a teacher, Azeri school, Kvemo Kartli).

A small number of the respondents (mainly from rural schools) thought that school boards might be justified in urban schools but were unnecessary in the countryside.

3.6. Efficiency of school boards

A majority of the respondents with positive attitude towards school boards complained that even though the underlying idea was good, its implementation was poor and efficiency of school boards remained rather low. Only a few school boards were more or less efficient, while activities of the rest were largely formal, they emphasised. The respondents specified various reasons of the inefficiency. First of all, board members do not know how to perform their functions. Besides, such form of school governance is new to the country and people are not prepared to accept and approve of it. As a result, school boards are very vulnerable to external influence and pressure.

“At first, we must teach the people and explain them what membership of a school board implies. Then and only then school boards should be elected. They must know that a school director is simply a hired public servant who can be easily fired if the school board is not satisfied with his or her work. So are, by the way, the ministers and the president. All processes in school must be transparent. We must tell them that they have no reasons to be afraid. Today school boards are fully controlled by directors” (Interview with a representative of an NGO, Imereti).

A large number of the respondents emphasised that school boards were inefficient because they were guided by private interests – those of directors or a small group of people – rather than interests of the school. Many school boards are either defunct or follow directors' orders obediently.

“I'm not happy about the creation of school boards. To say the truth, schools are again governed by directors just like they used to be in the past. I mean all schools without exception. The powers of school boards are largely formal and all their decisions are nothing but dead letter. In every school only those candidates who have the favour of the director can be elected a board member and all school boards are obedient to the directors' will” (Interview with a school director, Kvemo Kartli)

3.7. Relations between school boards and directors

Respondents described the following forms of relations between school boards and directors: cooperation between efficient school boards and directors, control over school boards by directors, confrontation between school boards and directors, school boards “allied” with directors, and inefficient directors and defunct school boards.

Cases of cooperation between an efficient school board and the director – i.e. dealing with school problems jointly, in a transparent way and without conflicts and tensions – are rare. More often school boards are controlled by directors and obediently follow their orders – such boards cannot perform their functions efficiently.

“Our school board is completely defunct. Nobody asks our opinion; the director decides everything. The school board only rubber-stamps his decisions” (Interview with a teacher, Javakheti).

Respondents cited examples of the school boards “allied” to school directors.

“Many school boards are quite functional. But they are staffed by directors’ relatives or friends. They have common interests and goals and put their interests ahead of the interests of the school” (Interview with a representative of a resource centre, Javakheti).

In a small number of schools boards are in opposition to and/or confrontation with directors. However, such boards seem more or less efficient. In theory, school boards must be independent of directors. But they can hardly be, unless respective mechanisms are in place.

“School boards can work quite efficiently, provided directors do not interfere in their activities. But directors usually intervene at every step. That is why mechanisms are needed to prevent directors meddling in activities of school boards” (Interview with an acting school director, Imereti).

In a considerable number of schools both directors and school boards are inefficient and largely defunct.

3.8. The regularity of school board sittings

A majority of the respondents did not know whether there were any basic rules on how often school boards should convene. Those respondents who assessed their school boards as efficient enough gave different answers to the question about regularity of school board sittings: once a month, at the start of each trimester, irregularly (only when the need arises), etc. Part of the respondents emphasised that although their school boards convened regularly, these sittings were formal and symbolic, just to create the impression of active work.

“I don’t like our school board. It was set up several years ago and has never convened, not even once, since then” (Interview with a teacher, an Azeri school, Kvemo Kartli).

3.9. Teacher performance assessment

Apart from low efficiency of school boards, the respondents pointed out that teacher performance was also far from satisfactory. A large number of the respondents emphasised that despite certain changes in school life, staff relations in school remained largely unchanged – teachers still have no say in the decision-making process and have to follow directors’ orders obediently. A large number of the respondents argued that teachers themselves were to blame, as they were rather passive and did not seem interested in having a voice in the decision-making. Inert teachers, members of school boards, make the boards even more inefficient. But other respondents held a different view, believing that teachers – as well as pupils and schools in general – are more active and independent today than they were in the past.

3.10. Specific activities of school boards

When asked to provide examples of specific problems resolved by their school boards, a majority of the respondents, including directors, had no answer.

“To be more specific, I need to look into minutes of the school board sittings. They have detailed information” (Interview with a parent, a school board member, Imereti).

“I cannot provide any specific examples of what the school board has done. I’m unable to recall anything” (Interview with a teacher of Russian, Imereti).

“The school board deals mainly with financial problems. I’ve not heard of the board tackling other kind of issues” (Interview with a representative of a resource centre, Ajaria).

Part of school directors, representatives of resource centres and board members tried to draw a positive picture of their school board’s activities. However, most of them either cited occasional

cases or simply generalised about the problem. Some respondents recalled particular issues discussed by their school boards: repairs in school, uniforms for pupils, incentives for teachers, etc.

Only a few respondents were able to answer the question about their school board's particular initiatives, providing various examples, for instance a project to help socially vulnerable children.

“The board came up with an initiative to help destitute children. We have 1,220 GEL for the project. We're going to buy books in September, keep them in the library, and distribute among the children” (Interview with a school director, Ajaria).

Some respondents cited nomination and election of head teachers as one of the examples of school boards' initiatives.

“The board decided, for instance, to nominate me as the head teacher. It was the board's initiative” (Interview with a teacher, Ajaria).

3.11. Elections of school boards

The respondents' answers showed that the election process varied by school. In a considerable number of schools elections of school boards were fair, transparent and democratic. In many schools, however, the election process was formal and directors managed to ensure that board members were chosen only from their retinue. One of the school directors proudly confessed that he supervised the election process and decided who should become the board chairman.

“I think it is inappropriate for school boards to be chaired by an ordinary teacher. I made them elect my deputy” (Interview with a school director).

In many schools board members were selected formally and neither the members nor other teachers showed much interest in the process. Some board members were elected against their will – they were simply ordered to assume new responsibilities. Although they formally obeyed, they know nothing about their new functions and duties.

“We did not want to become board members. We were elected against our will. It is an extra burden for us. And we have no idea what functions we must carry out” (Interview with a deputy director, board chairman, Kvemo Kartli).

3.12. The lack of competence among board members

According to a majority of the respondents, most of the school board members, irrespective of education or motivation to become a board member, lack competence in carrying out the functions of a board member.

“Some of them are motivated and interested, but completely incompetent. If you talk to them, you will see that they know nothing other than the title “school board”. They have never read the law and have no idea what are their responsibilities” (Interview with a representative of an NGO, Imereti).

Although a majority of school boards remain passive, some of them work quite actively. Due to insufficient knowledge and competence, however, they make mistakes from time to time. For instance:

“The school board decided that pupils of Grade IX must pass exams – tests and interviews – to qualify for Grade X. Those pupils who received low marks in the exams were expelled. The board's intention was to sift out the brightest pupils for top grades of the school. But parents of the expelled children lodged a formal complaint with the education ministry. The school was chastised by the ministry and the expelled children were reinstated” (Interview with an acting school director, Ajaria).

A large number of the respondents suggested that school boards could become quite efficient, if their members were trained and explained their functions. But representatives of some resource centres insisted that resource centres had provided school board members with adequate training and the level of their competence was high enough.

3.13. Salaries of school board members

In the opinion of a large number of the respondents, apart from the lack of competence, low motivation of school board members is another important reason of the inefficiency of school boards. The respondents think that if school board members were paid for their work, their motivation would certainly increase. A relatively small number of the respondents argued that money would hardly be a motivating factor for school board members, as school boards were simply unnecessary, especially in rural areas.

4. Functions and responsibilities of resource centres

4.1. Access to information and information sources of schools

As mentioned above, the respondents displayed different levels of awareness of the changes in the education system. A large number of the respondents emphasised that they were unable to get timely information about ongoing education reform. The interviews with respondents revealed that urban residents were better informed than their counterparts in the countryside, and residents of ethnic enclaves were less aware of the ongoing processes in comparison with Georgian-populated regions.

Major sources of information for urban schools include the education ministry's directives, newspapers, TV programs, meetings with representatives of resource centres, Internet, news distributed by teachers. Rural schools get information mainly from school directors, television and those teachers who have participated in a conference or training workshop. Rural communities usually do not have access to Internet or don't know how to search information on the web. Respectively, online services are not viewed as information sources there.

Teachers get information mostly from school directors, while the latter are usually informed by resource centres, either in writing or by phone. Schools do not have direct communication with the education ministry. The biggest part of the information schools receive relates to changes in educational programs and curriculum.

The National Examination Centre provides schools with information about university admission exams. Respondents assessed information schools get from the NEC as useful and timely. Non-Georgian respondents positively evaluated guidebooks to admission exams published by the NEC. They also suggested that the level of awareness would increase in non-Georgian schools if the guidebooks were translated into Armenian and Azeri and offered at discounted prices (in their words, the current price – 14 GEL – is too high).

4.2. Information exchange among various structures of the education system (the ministry, resource centres, schools)

Schools' information supply chain is structured as follows: school – director – resource-centre – the ministry. Resource centres play a central role in information sharing between “upper” and “lower” levels of the chain, i.e. between schools and the ministry or specific departments of the ministry. School directors act as intermediaries between school teachers and resource centres. Part of the representatives of resource centres assessed their communication with the ministry as efficient and problem-free. But some others complained that resource centres were understaffed and underfunded and, at the same time, overloaded with work.

“We have a lot of work to do and demand for our service is rather high. We must communicate the ministry’s all new orders and directives to schools. It is a huge amount of work, but there is not enough staff in the resource centre to handle it. Our another responsibility is to monitor the situation in schools. It is also hard to carry out – I’m short of time and so is the administration. We spend most of our time gathering information about the ongoing education reform and reporting it to the ministry” (Interview with a representative of a resource centre, Ajaria).

“Communicating with the education ministry is a big problem – maintaining liaison with the ministry is a very hard task. The cost of delivering one letter to the ministry totals 21 GEL” (Interview with a representative of a resource centre, Kvemo Kartli).

In the words of the representatives of resources centres, communication with schools is also not easy, especially with schools in remote rural communities and mountainous regions. Visiting such schools involves high travel costs and consumes a lot of time, while telephone services are often down.

“Communicating with urban schools is not a problem. But when it comes to rural schools, the task is very hard – I need to visit 43 villages or talk by phone for three or four hours, as there are no other means of communication. Besides, there is no communication with five or six schools – there is simply no way I can reach them. Providing information to them is a problem for me” (Interview with a representative of a resource centre, Ajaria).

Only one representative of a resource centre claimed that the resource centre did not have any problems and was able to communicate successfully with both schools and the ministry even though it had only three staff members.

“What is a resource centre? Nothing else than an information distribution service. I think three people are quite enough to fulfil the task” (Interview with a representative of a resource centre, Kvemo Kartli).

Interviews with representatives of resource centres showed that conditions for information sharing were not equal for all schools. Another problem is that schools do not exchange information among them regularly. Schools do not know how particular problems are tackled in other schools, for instance what educational programs or textbooks are used in the education process, etc. As a rule, information exchange between schools is carried out through private meetings with colleagues or discussions at various conferences and training workshops. Experience sharing between schools is also limited. On the whole, inter-school relations are dominated by rivalry, which mainly takes the form of poaching on pupils (the more pupils a school has, the more vouchers it gets), rather than cooperation.

4.3. Functions of resource centres

A large number of the respondents, including representatives of resource centres, said the main function of a resource centre was to provide schools with timely information and assistance in dealing with various problems. In addition, representatives of resource centres emphasised that another function of a resource centre was to create common environment for schools to discuss different problems. More exactly, in their words, resource centres provide services for schools and cultural and sport institutions. The job involves quite a huge amount of work, they said. In their opinion, resource centres must pay more attention to schools, while cultural and sport institutions should be second in their priorities (the culture ministry is a separate system, they pointed out). Even though they say they are overloaded, they think that resource centres should be given more powers to intervene in the schooling process, since many problems can be solved at the school level, without consulting the education ministry.

“Resource centres must gather information about schools and the quality of their education process. But at the same time we are prohibited from interfering in the process. What should we base our assessment on? School directors may provide incorrect data. I asked school directors to test pupils’ skills and knowledge in every subject at least once in a trimester. The tests help assess pupils’ and teachers’ performance” (Interview with a representative of a resource centre, Imereti).

Teachers and parents were also sure that delivering information to schools was the main function of a resource centre (“resource-centre is an intermediary between a school and the education ministry”). Besides, in their words, resource centres should provide school personnel with training and education.

What functions should resource centres perform?

A large number of the respondents said that like former Soviet district-level education departments, resource centres must have the right to control.

“Resource centres must be given more powers. They should be able to control schools. It is vitally necessary” (Interview with a teacher of elementary school, Ajaria).

“I was fond of the old system based on district-level education departments. Representatives of the departments regularly attended lessons and provided recommendations. Resource centres should include separate sectors for each subject. There were such sectors in former district education departments – chemistry, biology, physics, mathematics, etc. Earlier we used to receive educational programs from these sectors and their representatives often attended lessons. The communication was easier in the past” (Focus group discussion, a teacher, a Georgian school, Kvemo Kartli).

Some respondents expressed completely opposite views. They argued that resource centres were unnecessary, as there was no need for an intermediary structure in relations between schools and the education ministry. The ministry and schools can well communicate with each other directly, they said.

4.4. Assessment of resource centres’ performance

The respondents’ assessments of resource centres’ performance varied widely. A large number of the respondents positively evaluated the resource centres’ work. Part of the respondents blamed resource centres for not keeping in touch with the teacher community. Resource centres should maintain closer relations with teachers, they said.

“Resource centres must inform and help us. Anyhow, they carry out their functions more or less well. They hold sittings every month and invite directors to discuss all innovations. The problem is whether directors understand what they are told at these discussions and whether they are able to communicate this information to teachers. We often have to look for such information anew and learn it again. Resource centres must be more open and their activities should be more transparent. They must offer more assistance for teachers and keep in touch with them” (Interview with a teacher of Georgian, Kvemo Kartli).

According to part of the respondents, personnel of resource centres often lack competence and qualification, and are unable to implement their responsibilities efficiently. Resource centres are said to have often failed to inform schools in time. Sometimes, resource centres exceed their authority and unduly interfere in school life and the decision-making process in school. In several cases, for instance, they tried to influence appointments in school and “advised” several candidates for the position of school director not to apply for the job. Sometimes, resource centres adopt unfair approaches – they provide information only for a small group of “privileged” schools, always invite the same people to their conferences and training seminars, etc. This criticism was mainly voiced by respondents from Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli.

“If you have a contact in a resource centre, you’ll get information. If you don’t, you’ll get nothing” (Interview with a board member, Kvemo Kartli).

As mentioned above, Georgian schools are better informed than non-Georgian ones. Some representatives of resource centres claimed that resource centres did not discriminate against non-Georgian schools and the latter had nobody to blame except themselves if they did not understand something and had problems as a result. In several cases respondents had rather superficial attitudes towards non-Georgian schools.

“How can we inform them about everything? We cannot train them incessantly, can we? They underwent the training once and that’s enough. Now they have to learn by themselves. But they are simply unable to learn and understand” (Interview with a representative of a resource centre, Kvemo Kartli).

It is noteworthy that part of the respondents, including a small number of parents and teachers, had never heard of resource centres.

5. Qualification exams for school directors

A majority of the respondents negatively assessed qualification exams for school directors, one of the key components of the education reform, which were held in 2007 nationwide. It must be mentioned, however, that a considerable part of the respondents said that the idea of qualification exams for school directors was quite good and acceptable. The respondents criticised specific aspects of the 2007 examination process and the rules for nomination of successful candidates. The 2007 qualification exams consisted of the following procedural stages: examination (four tests) was carried out at the first stage; at the second stage those candidates who successfully cleared the first stage were interviewed by the education ministry’s commission; at the third stage successful candidates were nominated to randomly selected schools (the process was dubbed a “lottery”); at the last stage the nominated candidates were interviewed/evaluated by school boards. The qualification exam was made up of four tests: Basic Skills, Professional Skills, Legislation, and Functional Writing (a project proposal to solve school problems). The respondents criticised various components and aspects of the examination process. A large number of the respondents welcomed the idea and mechanisms to test basic and professional skills of the candidates. But they negatively assessed the random selection of schools (i.e. the “lottery”) and interviews in the education ministry.

“The qualification exam for school directors is a good idea. A director must be skilled and educated. I think, however, that interviewing candidates is unacceptable. One interview is not enough to gauge my character. But the lottery was a real humiliation” (Interview with a teacher, Imereti).

What non-Georgian respondents criticised most of all was the requirement for candidates to take the Functional Writing test in Georgian. A majority of them assessed this requirement as useless and irrational, since most of the non-Georgian candidates did not speak Georgian fluently, if at all. In their words, it was a well-known fact and, therefore, there was not much point in testing the candidates’ language skills. Since the candidates’ poor knowledge of Georgian was known in advance, some respondents alleged that the test was part of the Georgian government’s discriminatory policy against ethnic minorities. In their opinion, the test aimed to sift out non-Georgian candidates and ensure that only ethnic Georgian directors are in charge of all schools of the country, no matter Georgian or non-Georgian.

A majority of the respondents said that every stage of the examination process was flawed or inefficient. A large number of the respondents argued that the process was far from fair and transparent. In some cases, in their words, the selection of candidates was based on nepotism. The

interviews were criticised most of all in this respect. Only a few respondents positively evaluated all stages of the examination process. In their words, it was quite fair and democratic.

Part of the respondents opted for passive obedience and consent. In their opinion, orders and directives of superiors must not be challenged and should be fulfilled fully, without protest and objection.

5.1. The urgency of the qualification exams for school directors

A large number of the respondents agreed that the qualification exams for school directors were timely and necessary, adding, however, that the process should have been better planned and implemented. A small number of the respondents questioned the need to test the skills of school directors, claiming that such exams were not necessary at all.

Most of the respondents who approved of the idea of holding qualification exams criticised certain stages of the process. In the opinion of some respondents, especially those who failed this stage of the exam, interviews with candidates were inefficient. A majority of the respondents were opposed to the nomination of directors through “lottery”. Only a small number of the respondents positively evaluated all phases of the selection process.

Opponents of the exams denounced all stages of the process as unacceptable. In their opinion, the qualification exams for school directors represent a vivid example of an ill-advised and unsuccessful reform.

5.2. The fairness and efficiency of the qualification exams

A large number of the respondents argued that the qualification exams failed to select the best candidates for the job. In fact, in their words, the exams made no difference, as little has changed in a majority of schools after appointment of qualified school directors. The schools continue to function as usual, despite the change of administration. Part of the respondents emphasised that as a result of the exams many schools have no directors at present, more exactly they are governed by acting directors, i.e. those candidates who failed the exams or those who preferred not to sit the exams at all.

“Those who scored zero marks in the exams retained their position as school director. I know five such cases. The ministry is wasting time and money. They annulled the exam results and were going to hold a second round, but it was never implemented” (Interview with a school director, Kvemo Kartli).

According to the respondents, the exams did not lead to any improvement. In their words, current school directors are no better than their predecessors.

5.3. Assessment of the examination process

A majority of the respondents agreed that school directors need to have respective skills and competence. But they differed on how to test their skills and knowledge. As mentioned above, respondents criticised almost all components of the exams: time-scale, interviews, “lottery”, etc.

- *Tests*

Some components of the examination – the Basic and Professional Skills tests – were criticised less than the others. However, a small number of the respondents argued that such tests could not measure candidates’ skills and abilities. Another test, Legislation, also received negative opinions. No doubt, school directors must have adequate knowledge of the laws and relevant normative acts but in reality, according to the respondents, few of them seem to have such knowledge, even though they passed the test successfully.

- *The role of the ethnic factor in the selection of school directors*

The exams proved especially hard, if not impossible to pass, for ethnic minorities who have poor fluency in Georgian or do not speak the language at all. In their opinion, candidates should have been either given more time to prepare for the exams or allowed to sit the Functional Writing Test in Russian or their native language. The test was not fair as the language factor put non-Georgian contestants at a clear disadvantage, they pointed out. In their opinion, eligibility for the position of school director should be determined by professionalism and experience rather than the language proficiency.

“It’s not the proper way to hold qualification exams for school directors. There are a lot of good teachers and directors, but they were simply unable to write the letter in Georgian. They should be taught the language before being required to sit the test in Georgian. Until then the test would not be fair” (Interview with a representative of a resource centre, Javakheti).

“Language is a big problem. Our director is a good professional. Is it right to fire him only because he does not speak Georgian?” (Interview a teacher, a Russian school, Kvemo Kartli).

Many respondents underlined that professionalism must be valued above the ethnic factor. Nevertheless, some candidates for school director were turned down by boards of non-Georgian schools, mostly because they did not speak the language of the respective minority (Armenian or Azeri). Respondents admitted that, unfortunately, these boards, too, put the ethnic factor ahead of professionalism and experience. This is because the problem was not properly addressed in the examination process, the respondents said.

“Ethnic background must not be a criterion for selecting school directors. To get the job, a successful candidate must have adequate training and high moral values. But a school director must understand the language of his/her pupils and teachers and visa versa so that they are able to communicate with each other” (Interview with a teacher, Kvemo Kartli).

Apart from the language, a school director must also know and respect the ethnic culture of the pupils and teachers of the school. For instance, respective national holidays must be celebrated in school on a regular basis. Parents and teachers of non-Georgian schools fear that ethnic Georgian directors will be less respectful of their culture.

Some Georgian respondents said that ethnic minorities themselves must tackle the problem, i.e. they should learn Georgian if an ethnic Georgian is nominated to their school as director or if a non-Georgian director is nominated to a Georgian school (through the “lottery”). Some respondents did not conceal their negative attitude towards those ethnic minorities who did not speak Georgian.

“They would have failed the exams anyway, no matter what language was used in the tests, because they are illiterate, they are shepherds, they know nothing” (Interview with a representative of a resource centre).

- *The time-scale of the exams*

Part of the respondents said that the examination process was ill-planned and ill-organised. For instance, the exams lasted a whole day and were overloaded. Breaks and refreshments were not planned properly. In their opinion, the process should have been divided into two days.

- *Interviews*

A large number of the respondents assessed the second component of the exams – interviews – as unfair. For instance, rejected candidates were not explained why they were turned down. Part of the respondents emphasised that there were no standard selection criteria and candidates were chosen by arbitrary and subjective decisions of the examination commission members. Some respondents

argued that there was no need for such interviews, since candidates must have been approved in office by school boards afterwards. For some respondents it was a wrong procedure. Some respondents (directors and teachers) said they felt offended at being required to prove their qualification at interviews.

“The second stage – interview – was disgusting: standing in front of a group of 11 people and answering their questions, as if one was a pupil. I consider the interviews humiliating” (Interview with an acting school director, Imereti).

- *Lottery – random selection*

Many respondents had no objections to the tests but a majority of them denounced as unacceptable the random selection of schools for nominating successful candidates. Most of the respondents assessed the “lottery” as completely ineffective and useless. They questioned the rationale behind the random selection, which was said to have been designed to reduce corruption in school, and claimed that it created a lot of unnecessary problems instead. For instance, a candidate from one village ended up in another village’s school. Some respondents equated the “lottery” with human rights violation.

“My constitutional rights are violated because I was denied the chance to direct the school in my home village. I wonder why. I have passed the exams successfully, haven’t I?” (Interview with an acting school director, Imereti).

“I don’t like the current scheme to select school directors. If a candidate is suitable for the position of director in another village’s school, why cannot he do the job in his home village? Why should he or she spend so much time and effort travelling back and forth between the two villages?” (Interview with a parent, a board member, Samtskhe).

As mentioned above, non-Georgian schools have been affected by the problem most of all. Apart from travel costs, these schools are facing the communication problem – if a school director cannot communicate with teachers because of the language barrier, the education process in the school will be hardly efficient.

Only a small number of the respondents, mainly representatives of the structural units of the education ministry (for instance, staff of resource centres), positively assessed the “lottery”. In their words, the random selection ensured impartial and democratic choice.

- *Elections of directors by school boards*

At the last stage school boards elected directors from a number of nominated candidates. In the opinion of many respondents, the elections were not fair. The boards tended to reject “outsider” candidates and voted mainly in favour of their school’s ones. In several cases directors and school boards reached a deal: two schools rejected each other’s candidates and then “swapped” them. In other words, the random selection eventually ended in deals between school boards and directors. It means that the “lottery” failed to ensure unbiased choice, the respondents argued.

5.4. The role of resource centres in the selection of school directors

As mentioned above, part of the respondents blamed resource centres for failing to help candidates prepare for the qualification exams and for interfering, sometimes, in the selection process. Namely, resource centres were said to have openly instructed schools which candidates to elect.

5.5 Who must be eligible for the position of school director?

Many respondents found it unacceptable that as a result of the reform any citizen of Georgia regardless of profession – even those who have never been involved in educational activities before

– can become a school director, provided he or she has successfully passed the qualification exams. A majority of the respondents insisted that only people with respective qualification and experience – i.e. only those trained in the field of education – should be eligible for the position of school director.

5.6. The selection of best candidates for the job of school director

Respondents gave different opinions about how to select best candidates for the position of school director. A majority of them favoured a contest-based selection of suitable candidates, i.e. the qualification exams, provided the process is fair and democratic.

Other respondents advocated a return to the old, pre-reform system in which school directors were appointed directly by the education ministry. They also suggested that local self-governments may have a voice in the process. A large number of parents and teachers proposed that schools be given a free hand in electing school directors from their own personnel.

“Candidates for the job should be picked out from a school’s teachers. Afterwards, directors must be elected from the select candidates through direct democratic vote by teachers and parents. There must be several candidates in every school and only the best of them should be chosen as director” (Interview with a parent, Imereti).

5.7. The current status of school directors

A large number of respondents were unhappy that in many schools candidates had not been nominated yet. Such schools are governed by acting directors today. In the respondents’ opinion, this factor reduces motivation in school directors, damages their credibility and, consequently, negatively affects the management process in school.

6. Qualification exams for school teachers

In the framework of the education reform the Ministry of Education and Science is planning to hold qualification exams for schoolteachers in the near future. A large number of the respondents agreed that professional qualifications of schoolteachers varied considerably. In their words, many teachers do not meet even minimal professional standards. Nevertheless, the respondents’ opinions differed greatly – from flatly negative (“such exams are useless and formal”) to positive (“the exams are vital and urgently needed”) – on the need to test teachers’ skills through qualification exams. Respondents also expressed different views on who should conduct the exams and how qualified teachers must be sifted out. Respondents showed different levels of awareness about the coming qualification exams for schoolteachers.

6.1. Is it really necessary to carry out the qualification exams for schoolteachers?

Several types of answers were given to this question.

- *The exams are vital and urgently needed, as schools are lacking in professional and experienced cadre*

A large number of the respondents said teachers’ skills must be tested, since many current teachers fail to conform to modern professional teaching standards and “must be fired”. In the opinion of some respondents, teachers themselves should be interested in such qualification exams, since their wages depend on their qualification. Many respondents approved of regular, pre-planned

qualification exams, which can, in their opinion, motivate teachers to improve their professionalism and acquire new skills and knowledge.

“Teachers must not relax. Their skills and abilities should be tested systematically, and they should be stimulated to improve their qualification. Qualification exams will facilitate teacher professional development” (Interview with a teacher, Imereti).

- *Such exams are not needed at all*

Part of the respondents argued that there was no need to test teachers' skills because the problem of their qualification would be solved by self-regulation mechanisms: old teachers will soon retire, while young pedagogues do not need testing because their qualification is a responsibility of the higher educational institution that gave them a diploma. They must graduate from a university with a respective degree and get a certificate. If so, in the respondents' words, it's no use testing their skills again. The education reform highlighted the need for new skills (for instance, a teacher of integrated subjects), which should be also taught by universities. Respectively, the qualification exams are useless as they can subject teachers to unnecessary psychological pressure.

- *The exams are unnecessary since the process is ill-planned and ill-organised at the present stage*

Part of the respondents pointed out that all previous exams were inefficient and conducted in a way that made teachers feel humiliated. They admitted, however, that the idea of qualification exams was good and acceptable. However, in their words, all hitherto held qualification exams were ill-planned and based on arbitrary decisions of top governmental officials rather than on realistic needs assessment. Besides, teachers' opinions were ignored in the process. In the opinion of the respondents, the government and the education ministry do not seem to have a clear and coherent approach to the problem.

“In general, everybody's skills need to be tested. But teachers feel that their current situation is humiliating. They took qualification exams a couple of years ago. As a result, all teachers were divided into three categories. A change of government should not lead to new reforms in every sphere. We must appreciate what these people achieved in the past exams. If that exams were wrong, their organisers should be sued. The exams must be regular but they must be also well-thought-out” (Interview with a representative of an NGO, Imereti).

Some respondents cited the feedback from the directors exams (part of the directors assessed interviews with candidates as unfair, inefficient and humiliating) to prove that the testing of teachers would be hardly better. In their words, many of the examiners do not have enough qualification to decide whether a director or a teacher is suitable for the job. The interviews will be acceptable only if they are conducted by examiners with high qualification in the field, they said.

“Interviews are carried out by people who know nothing about pedagogy and have zero pedagogic experience. For instance, I see nothing wrong with being interviewed by Ghia Nodia. It's not humiliating. He is an intellectual and his instruction and advice is really valuable. But it is a real humiliation when a 20-year-old greenhorn reads lessons to people with 40-year experience” (Interview with a representative of an NGO, Imereti).

- *There is no need for such exams. Schools are well able to select and hire qualified personnel by themselves.*

Part of the respondents believed that qualification exams were unnecessary because schools had enough mechanisms to regulate their personnel problems – i.e. to select and hire professional cadre – by themselves. For instance, teachers' skills can be assessed by a school administration and those found unsuitable for the classroom could be dismissed. Besides, part of the respondents

doubted that the qualification exams for teachers would be fair and efficient. In their opinion, the exam results would be largely fixed and determined by nepotism, just like it was the case with the directors exams.

- *Instead of exams, teachers should be offered retraining and professional development courses.*

Part of the opponents of the qualification exams admitted that a significant number of school teachers did not have adequate professional skills. However, in their opinion, the problem should be solved through teacher professional development and training programs, not by means of exams and tests. The teachers' professionalism declined just because there were no such programs in the last 15 years, they said.

They also argued that qualification exams for teachers were expensive and unprofitable. It would be better to spend the money on teacher professional development and training programs, which are really needed and must be free of charge, they said.

6.2. The level of awareness

The level of awareness of the teachers' exams varied significantly among the respondents. A small number of them had more or less detailed information about the exams. But the others had very vague and superficial knowledge of the problem. The level of awareness was especially low among residents of ethnic enclaves. Respondents emphasised that just the lack of information and/or incomplete or incorrect information accounted for the prevalence of negative attitudes towards the exams in the teacher community. The lack of information fuels fears and, subsequently, negative attitudes.

Part of the respondents blamed negative attitudes among the teachers on the education ministry's often ambiguous and incoherent decisions and exam-related directives. Teachers usually get information predominantly from their school administration, while the latter must be kept informed by resource centres. In reality, however, even school directors sometimes do not have full information on various matters, since resource centres fail to inform them. Representatives of resource centres claimed that they possessed all necessary information, though during interviews they were unable to give exact and clear answers to some questions.

- *When will be the qualification exams carried out? Will they take place at all?*

Respondents were unable to specify the date of the coming exams and did not know whether they would take place at all. A small number of the respondents claimed that the exams had been cancelled by the president. A majority of the respondents believed that the exams were imminent but could not say when and how they would be implemented, since the ministry constantly changes its plans.

- *What kind of tests will be included in the exams?*

A considerable number of the respondents did not know what kind of tests candidates would be required to take during the exams. Some respondents were concerned that the exams could include Basic Skills Test, like the one that is part of the national matriculation exams. Only part of the respondents knew that candidates would have to take Professional Skills Test and tests in various subjects of the school curriculum. They were also familiar with the structure of the examination process.

- *Professional Skills Test*

Those respondents who had a chance to attend the official approbation of the coming qualification exams organised by the National Examination Centre appeared better informed about the

future Professional Skills Test. Others had a rather vague idea of what the test would be like. Respectively, they were unable to evaluate it. The participants of the approbation emphasised that few teachers would be able to complete the test successfully without adequate preparation, since most of them did not have respective knowledge.

- *Professional teaching standards*

Few respondents knew that the qualification exams would aim to assess how well candidates comply with professional teaching standards. The standards were worked out by the Ministry of Education and Science and are available at its website. It seems that a majority of teachers know nothing about them and, consequently, do not have any opinion on them.

6.3. Teacher certification

Supporters of the idea of teacher certification proposed that at first teachers should get thorough training in various subjects and improve their professional skills. Only afterwards, it was argued, they should be required to undergo the certification tests. The training must be free of charge and available to every teacher, while the certification process must be fair and transparent, the respondents emphasised, adding that only those candidates who successfully complete both stages – training and certification tests – should be receive teacher certificates.

“At first teachers should attend free training workshops, prepare for the tests and only then take certification tests” (Focus group discussion, a teacher, Imereti).

Certification is not the only reason for training, the respondents said. In their words, the training can help teachers keep pace with recent changes and innovations in the education system. For instance, few current school teachers are qualified for integrated teaching, a recently introduced new teaching technique. It means that they must get respective training. Part of the respondents said it was vitally important to supply schools with detailed information about the certification process by means of information newsletters, bulletins and newspapers.

6.4. Teacher salary

In respondents’ opinion, although teacher salaries have increased and are paid timely, teachers are still underpaid and, at the same time, have to pay too high income tax (25%).

“A member of parliament is paid 2,500 GEL a month and can miss a parliamentary session whenever he or she likes. Why shouldn’t I get a 500 GEL salary?” (Interview with a teacher, Imereti).

6.5. Problems of non-Georgian school teachers in connection with the qualification exams

Unlike their Georgian counterparts, non-Georgian school teachers do not have enough information about the coming qualification exams and, therefore, are worried and afraid. What makes them especially uneasy is the uncertainty about what language will be used in the exams. They fear that they will be required to sit the exams in Georgian, the language they do not speak well enough.

“At first they said the exams would be in Georgian. Then the resource centre said every candidate would be able to take the exams in his or her native language. But there is still no definite information about this problem” (Focus group discussion, a teacher, Javakheti).

Non-Georgian respondents underlined that non-Georgian candidates would certainly fail the exams if they were held in Georgian.

“We’ll be unable to pass the exams if they are in Georgian. We don’t speak Georgian. I’m trying to learn the language. I have made several attempts to read a Georgian grammar textbook but in vain – it is too hard to understand” (Interview with a teacher, ethnic Azeri, Kvemo Kartli).

A majority of non-Georgian respondents positively evaluated the idea of qualification exams. But like their Georgian counterparts, they also insisted that teachers should get training before the exams. For non-Georgian school teachers the training must include a Georgian language course, they emphasised. If the training program does not include such a course, non-Georgian school teachers should be given an opportunity to sit the exams in their native language, the respondents said.

“In general, qualification tests are important and necessary. But in present circumstances the tests must be carried out in different languages” (Interview with a teacher, Javakheti).

Non-Georgian respondents also feared that the qualification exams would be based on Georgian school textbooks, which are different from those of non-Georgian schools.

“Georgian schools have different textbooks, different teaching methodologies, and different curriculum. If we use our textbooks to prepare for the exams, we’ll certainly face great difficulties” (Interview with a teacher, ethnic Azeri, Kvemo Kartli).

Non-Georgian school teachers fear that as a result of the education reform there will be nobody to replace them after they retire, as ethnic youths have fewer chances to get higher education in Georgia. They are also afraid that if the qualification exams are held in Georgian, many non-Georgian teachers may fail to qualify and will lose their job. Consequently, some non-Georgian schools may face severe staff shortages and some of them may be even closed as a result. Non-Georgian respondents pointed out that there were increasingly fewer young cadre to replace the ageing personnel of non-Georgian schools.

“The problem is that the teacher profession is no longer popular with the youth and student enrolment dropped significantly in pedagogic faculties, while current teachers are gradually getting older. What will happen to the schools after they retire? (Interview with a teacher, Javakheti).

A small number of the Georgian respondents, residents of ethnic enclaves, agreed that the education reform was a major reason of worry and unease for ethnic minorities (there are widespread fears that one of the objectives of the reform is to phase out non-Georgian schools), largely because they don’t have detailed information about all aspects of the reform. In the respondents’ opinion, the government must pay more attention to the problems of ethnic minorities and do more for their integration. Some respondents deemed that the qualification exams must be in Georgian for all school teachers, no matter what school they are from – Georgian or non-Georgian.

7. The professional level of school teachers and teacher professional development programs

A majority of the respondents said that many teachers did not meet professional teaching standards and needed to improve their qualification. The respondents emphasised that they were ready to attend training workshops and seminars to upgrade their skills. But teacher training courses and workshops have been irregular and ill-planned in recent times. Besides, teachers do not have equal access to such training. Respondents were asked to assess the quality, quantity and content of these training programs.

7.1. Access to the training

Teachers do not have equal access to the training. A small number of the respondents claimed that they had attended training workshops on a regular basis (once or twice a month). Part of the respondents said that in the last several years they were able to attend only one or two training workshops, while a large number of the respondents said that they had no such opportunities in the last 15-20 years. In the respondents' words, teachers of Tbilisi have much more opportunities to take professional training courses if compared with their counterparts from rural areas. Those attending the training regularly suggested that there was no need to conduct training workshops too often. It is quite enough to hold the training once in a quarter, they argued. Although trained teachers are ready to provide their colleagues, those who have not undergone training yet, with advice and assistance, a large number of the respondents assessed such assistance as ineffective and inefficient. In their opinion, it would be better to give all teachers equal opportunities to attend the training and improve their skills and qualification.

When asked to specify main impeding factors for the participation in training seminars a significant number of those respondents who rarely attend training workshops named shortage of time, too remote and inconvenient venue, and high fees. But the main problem is that teachers are not informed about available training courses and invited to them in time. Respondents suspected that resource centres tended to invite the same teachers to all their training workshops and keep the rest in the dark.

"The training workshop had high fees and was held in Tbilisi at that. Few can afford such fees coupled with travel costs. Such training courses are very rare in rural areas. The training would be more useful, if it were available for rural school teachers more often" (Interview with a teacher, Kvemo Kartli).

"There are no training workshops or seminars. We get only updates on methodological changes from the resource centre" (Interview with a school board member, ethnic Armenian, Samtskhe).

Schools do not have equal opportunities to participate in the training. Teachers of non-Georgian schools rarely attend training workshops, though they admit that the training is very important for them, especially one of its components – the Georgian language course. Just the language problem may explain why non-Georgian school teachers are a rare sight in the training classroom – they do not speak Georgian, the only language of instruction in the training.

"We are never invited to training workshops or seminars. If there are any changes or innovations, we simply receive a respective information letter from the ministry or the resource centre. But the information, especially that about laws, is very vague and we can hardly understand it" (Interview with a teacher of a Russian school, Kvemo Kartli).

Representatives of resource centres claimed that all information was delivered to non-Georgian schools fully and in time. They should blame themselves if they don't understand anything, they said.

"We regularly inform teachers about professional development opportunities. But these people are different, very backward indeed. You must repeat one and the same thing over and over dozens of times to make them understand" (Interview with a representative of a resource centre).

7.2. Training providers

According to the respondents, training providers include different organisations: resource centres, various departments of the education ministry, and NGOs (within the framework of their projects). Some of them provide the training free of charge, but others demand fees. Respondents were often unable to specify the title of a training provider. It seems that teachers are not required to provide any training feedback. Most of the respondents said the training they had attended was organised by a resource centre.

The education ministry provides training on every component of the education reform: a new system to assess pupil achievement, new teaching methodologies, etc. Resource centres also offer various training courses and workshops. Part of the respondents praised resource centres for regular and efficient training. Teachers are satisfied, they said. A large number of the respondents suggested that special training courses should be organised for school board members in order to teach them their functions and responsibilities.

7.3. The quality and contents of the training

Respondents had different assessments of the quality of training. In some respondents' words, given the general lack of information, every training is important and useful, though some training workshops were too short and superficial, while participants were given no hand-outs. In some cases the training was carried out by unskilled and poorly qualified trainers. Representatives of some resource centres negatively evaluated the quality of training provided by NGOs. In their opinion, only the education ministry is capable of organising high-quality and efficient training workshops.

“There are lots of training providers. But the quality of their training is very low. Sometimes participants get incorrect information at such training workshops” (Interview with a representative of a resource centre).

According to some teachers, training workshops organised by resource centres are sometimes carried out by poorly qualified trainers.

“Some trainers, ridiculous as it is, need training themselves – they have no idea what school is all about. Training must be carried out by professionals” (Focus group discussion, a teacher, interview).

A majority of the teachers positively assessed the contents of training, which included new teaching methodologies, pupil achievement assessment, etc. In the teachers' words, training in specific subjects of the school curriculum was especially important for them, but such kind of training is rare and/or too expensive.

“As a rule, most of the training workshops address general issues. I would like to have training in my subject, but it has not been available so far. A special training workshop was organised last year for teachers of pilot classes, but the fee was too high – 120 GEL” (Interview with a teacher, Imereti).

8. The voucher-based school funding system and the optimisation process in schools

A majority of the respondents criticised the new voucher-based school funding system and the optimisation process. In their opinion, both problems are closely intertwined.

8.1. The voucherisation of school funding

Under the new voucher-based school funding scheme, allocation of state funds for schools depends on the number of pupils in a school: the more pupils in a school, the more funds the school gets from the state.

Only a small number of the respondents had a detailed knowledge of the new funding system. A majority of the respondents knew only that vouchers are “linked” to the number of pupils, i.e. schools should seek to increase their enrolment rate. Some respondents, mainly from ethnic en-

claves, said they knew nothing about the new system. Although the new system was largely obscure to most of the respondents, they did not refuse to assess it. Their opinions can be divided into four categories:

- The new funding system is inefficient (a large number of the respondents)
- A good idea but bad implementation. The new system does not take account of the differences between various schools – small and large schools, urban and rural schools – and regional specifics (a relatively small number of the respondents).
- The system has both pros and cons (part of the respondents).
- The system is good and efficient (a small number of the respondents).

8.1.1. Arguments of the proponents of the new system

Only a small number of the respondents supported the new funding scheme. In their opinion, it is a quite efficient system, which helped renovate school buildings, upgrade their equipment and increase teacher salaries. However, it was not quite clear for them which elements of the schooling process could be funded by vouchers and which ones were covered directly by the state. For instance, part of the respondents thought that vouchers could be used to pay for reconstruction of schools, while the rest were sure that schools got repair funds from the state budget.

The proponents assessed the voucher system, i.e. per-pupil school funding, as effective and useful because school funds depend on the number of pupils. In their opinion, the “link” between the funding and the number of pupils will urge schools pay more attention to and take into account the rights of pupils.

“Earlier school authorities used to threaten pupils that they would be expelled unless they behaved well. Now they need to strike a balance between maintaining discipline in school and retaining a sufficient number of vouchers, i.e. they have to adopt a pupil-centred approach” (Interview with a school director, ethnic Georgian, Kvemo Kartli).

8.1.2. Arguments of the opponents of the new system

One of the main arguments of the opponents of the new system is that it created funding disparities between different schools.

“Voucherisation is not good, as it leads to unfair distribution of funds among schools” (Interview with a school board member, an Armenian school, Samtskhe).

Opponents, too, highlighted the “link” between the funding and the number of pupils. Unlike the proponents of the system, however, they argued that it had negative, not positive, effect. Namely, in their words, it encourages schools to poach on pupils, using sometimes not quite honest methods. Besides, schools tend to close their eyes to many negative processes in order to attract and keep more pupils.

“The per-pupil voucher system is harmful. Pupils can now easily “blackmail” school authorities by threatening to drop out. Schools often turn a blind eye to pupils’ misbehaviour for fear that punitive measures may urge pupils to leave – as a result, the school will lose vouchers, i.e. money. That is why the level of discipline and academic achievement is gradually falling in school” (Interview with a teacher, Ajaria).

Unfair and inefficient distribution of vouchers between small and large schools, and between rural and urban schools was identified as another important problem. A large number of the respondents had rather contradictory views on the problem. Some of them said that the system was more beneficial for rural schools than for urban ones, while others said the opposite was true. It was clear that their conflicting opinions stemmed from incomplete and vague data.

“I’m in favour of the voucherisation. But I don’t like that rural schools get more funds than we do. They can spend more money on their needs. We’re struggling to cope with our problems and

can solve them only gradually, step by step, while they can solve the same problems much more rapidly” (Interview with a school director, urban school, Kvemo Kartli).

Representatives of rural schools were certain that urban schools were better off because they had more pupils. Part of the respondents emphasised that only large schools could benefit from the new funding system, as they have more pupils and, respectively, more vouchers. In other words, the system is good for large schools but bad for small ones.

“The voucherisation is good for large schools. They are funded sufficiently and timely, and can even save some money. The system works well in large schools, but in small schools it does not” (Interview with a teacher, Kvemo Kartli).

Only a small number of the respondents knew that small schools could get direct subsidies from the state, if they don’t have enough vouchers to cover all their expenses. However, in their opinion, it is a clear indication that the system is imperfect and inefficient.

“Vouchers don’t make much difference to small schools, which are dependent on the ministry’s subsidies since they don’t have enough vouchers to pay salaries. There are 43 schools and 38 of them have fewer vouchers than needed. The system needs to be revised” (Interview with a school director, Ajaria).

The correlation between the number of pupils in class and the teacher salary also proved bewildering for respondents. They complained, for instance, that the more pupils they had in class, the less money they were paid.

“I know that overcrowded classes mean smaller salaries and visa versa. But I have no idea why it happens. It seems absurd” (Interview with a teachers, a school board member, Imereti).

Part of the respondents feared that schools in remote mountainous villages would be unable to survive in the new system and would have to shut down.

“Schools of mountainous villages do not have enough vouchers and may be closed as a result. For their part, the closures may trigger migration. The government must address the problem and increase vouchers for such schools to avert the danger of depopulation in mountainous areas. The ministry must subsidise such schools, though the schools will lose their independence as a result” (Interview with a teacher, Imereti).

8.2. The merger and optimisation of schools

A majority of the respondents showed critical attitude towards the optimisation process in schools. In their opinion, the idea of optimisation would be acceptable, if its practical implementation was efficient and effective. But the current optimisation process, in their words, cannot be assessed as efficient because it does not take into account specifics of different regions and different schools (just like the voucherisation process), such as differences between rural and urban schools, distances between schools, specifics of mountainous regions, etc. Such process can have only negative results, they claimed.

“I support effective and purposeful optimisation. But certainly it’s not the case in our country” (Interview with a school board member, a teacher, Ajaria).

In the respondents’ opinion, the optimisation process should be organised in such a way that it can benefit all schools, pupils and teachers. But in reality, in their words, the current process is beneficial only to part of the schools, while for the others – namely small and rural schools – it could be even detrimental. In some cases a merger of small schools may be really reasonable and effective. But in other cases the benefits are not so obvious. The practice of merging may be suitable

and less painful for urban schools. In the countryside, however, prospects of every school should be thoroughly analysed and all pros and cons must be weighed. The optimisation will not be adequate, if decisions to merge are based only on the number of pupils in schools.

The respondents emphasised that the optimisation created serious problems for many rural communities, where teachers and pupils have now to walk several kilometres to reach their school. In some regions, where winter is usually harsh and cold, the education process is actually paralysed in wintertime, as pupils are unable to reach neighbouring villages in heavy snow. A school bus service, promised by the government, is available only in a limited number of areas and often fails to keep a regular schedule.

Apart from endangering the education process, this problem may also trigger outward migration from villages. Parents will prefer to move house to get their children into a good school.

“It’s wrong to close schools indiscriminately. The government should not sacrifice interests of pupils for short-term benefits: if earlier pupils had to walk one or two kilometres to school, now that distance has reached five-six kilometres. School buses are nowhere in sight. Although the school bus service is available in some areas, schools simply cannot afford to pay for fuel and the driver’s salary. For some villages, especially in the highlands, the closure of schools spells real disaster, as migration may increase and the villages will be completely depopulated” (Interview with an acting school director, Imereti).

Part of the respondents from mountainous regions admitted that the optimisation was necessary: in some schools the number of pupils in classroom can be counted on the fingers of one hand, and sometimes pupils from different grades sit alongside each other in one classroom. Besides, such schools usually lack professional personnel. But merging several such schools into one, so that pupils of closed schools have to walk to a neighbouring village every day to attend their lessons, is not the best way to solve the problem. Arguably, it would be more efficient to set up a boarding school instead of the closed ones where pupils would live during the term, visiting their homes at weekends. Such boarding schools were quite widespread in Soviet times.

Part of the respondents argued that priority should be given to social needs of local communities. Many local residents, in their words, want their kids to attend school not far from home. Besides, authorities sometimes close one school but allow another, with exactly the same conditions, to continue working as usual, without bothering to explain the teachers and parents the reasons of such selective approach. That is why people sometimes suspect that the optimisation process is driven by nepotism: school directors with useful connections in the government are able to pull strings to save their schools from closure or even set up a new school without taking into account the local public opinion. Teachers complained that their rights and interests were ignored during the optimisation. For instance, they often lose their jobs as a result of the optimisation.

9. The quality of secondary education

9.1. Efficiency of the education process

The respondents were concerned with the quality of secondary education and pupils’ motivation to study. But their assessments of these aspects varied. Part of the respondents viewed the former Soviet education system as a benchmark for the quality of public education. In their words, the present schooling quality does not stand comparison with the Soviet one. Pupils of Soviet schools were educated much better than students of the current ones, they argued. Another (a relatively small) part of the respondents expressed the opposite view: in their words, the quality of secondary education and pupils’ knowledge have improved in recent years. The third part of the respondents said that nothing had changed in the education system, in terms of quality, despite the ongoing reform. Some of them alleged that the government deliberately abstained from carrying out real changes in the education system, as its policy was to “breed low category people” in the country.

“Pupils no longer get as much knowledge in school today as they used to receive in the past. The quality of their education has dropped. They don’t like reading books any more. Their participation in school life is low. They have divorced from books. The overall level has reduced and that is why we, teachers, have difficulty performing our duties” (Interview with a teacher, Ajaria).

“I think that the methodology to teach basic skills and knowledge has worsened. Priority is given to teaching service sector skills. Although this sector is pragmatic and profitable, we should provide better education. Who knows what tomorrow may bring? Education should not be limited to the service industry” (Interview with a representative of a NGO, Imereti).

The respondents voiced different opinions on pupils’ motivation and attitudes to learning. According to part of the respondents, pupils’ motivation and interest has increased. Others claimed, in contrast, that it has reduced. Some respondents insisted that nothing has changed in this respect – some pupils have high motivation for learning, others do not and the proportion between them remains unchanged.

Those respondents who argued that the motivation for learning has grown cited the national matriculation exams as proof of their point. Today, in their opinion, pupils are more motivated to learn because they have realised that only knowledge can open the door to a university. New education policies – autonomy of schools, team learning, etc – have also played a role in the strengthening of motivation, they said. The respondents proposed that the best achieving pupils be presented with gifts or other awards to consolidate their motivation and set an example for the others.

The respondents with pessimistic views, i.e. those who claimed that pupils’ interest has declined, argued that pupils tended to learn only subjects of the matriculation examination program. In their words, those pupils who are not going to enrol in a university have actually turned their back to schooling.

A large number of the respondents explained the falling level of education and pupils’ low motivation by the failure of schools to pay proper attention to the quality and contents of the education process. They pointed out that grade exams had been abolished and nothing was done to make sure that pupils learn their materials (however, some respondents were glad that schools no longer hold the grade exams), secondary education certificates were no longer seen as something worth striving for, discipline was breaking down in many schools, the lessons schedule was often neglected, etc. Although the situation is better in some schools, the general tendency in the country is towards lower education quality.

“Teachers no longer check how well pupils learn materials in classroom. In addition, grade exams are not held any more” (Interview with a representative of a resource centre, Ajaria).

“Discipline and attendance are not given proper attention. As far as I know, the attendance rate is especially low in top grades. From this viewpoint, the situation in regional schools is better than that in schools of Tbilisi” (Interview with a parent, Imereti).

As mentioned above, a small number of the respondents linked poor discipline in school to the voucherisation process: schools tend to turn a blind eye to pupils’ misbehaviour, actually encouraging it, for fear that punitive measures may urge pupils to leave and the school will lose vouchers, i.e. money, as a result.

9.2. The quality of education in non-Georgian schools

Representatives of both Georgian and non-Georgian schools were concerned with pupils’ low interest in learning. Non-Georgian respondents emphasised that in non-Georgian schools pupils’ motivation had declined more than it did in Georgian ones, as non-Georgian youths are certain that because of their poor proficiency in Georgian they have little chance of getting higher education and a job in Georgia.

“I know why pupils no longer want to learn: they don’t believe in the future. Chances of getting higher education in Georgia have been slim for non-Georgian school leavers in recent times” (Interview with a teacher, Kvemo Kartli).

In the opinion of ethnic minorities, poor knowledge of the state language is a serious problem. Part of them think that the language problem is not the only obstacle to getting a job in Georgia. Some of them have university education and speak Georgian fluently but are unable to find a job anyway because of what they claimed was the Georgian government’s deliberate discriminatory policy. Under such circumstances, motivation for learning Georgian can hardly increase among ethnic minorities.

“Getting education and finding a job is a huge problem for us. Some of our youths have graduated successfully and returned to their home region. But they remain unemployed, even though they speak Georgian pretty well. Ethnic minorities are woefully underrepresented in the public service. I think it is a general tendency in the country” (Interview with a teacher of the Russian language and literature, Kvemo Kartli).

Some respondents claimed that the situation was gradually getting better.

“Years from 1989 to 2003 were a turbulent period in the country’s history. Life is getting better today. Relations with Georgians were a bit cool in the past, but they are much better now. Emigration has slowed down. Schools of ethnic minorities are not afraid of the education reform. On the contrary, they support the changes” (Interview with a teacher, ethnic Azeri, Kvemo Kartli).

9.3. The level of Georgian proficiency in non-Georgian schools

Respondents from Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli pointed out that fluency in Georgian remained very low in local ethnic communities, especially in rural areas, though many local residents were willing and ready to learn the language. Non-Georgian respondents specified two major factors that hindered their chances to learn Georgian: the absence of the “Georgian-speaking environment” and inadequate conditions for learning the language. Although Georgian language courses have been available in ethnic enclaves in recent years, there are still no positive results as the courses are not regular and efficient. The lack of “Georgian-speaking environment” and inefficient teaching of Georgian in school were identified as major negative factors. There are few professional teachers of Georgian in ethnic enclaves and the problem has not been addressed yet.

“There are few teachers of Georgian in our region. The government must do something about it. It should train teachers. It should provide some privileges for ethnic minorities to encourage them to get Georgian education and return to the region as school teachers” (Interview with a representative of a resource centre, Javakheti).

“My children learn Georgian in school, but the quality of teaching is very low. The level of fluency children acquire in school is not enough to pass the national matriculation exams successfully” (Interview with a parent, Kvemo Kartli).

“Georgian is taught in a different way in non-Georgian schools. And Georgian language exams are also different there. The Georgian language syllabus for Georgian schools is different from that used in Azeri schools. I wonder how we can take the exams. But nobody seems to care” (Interview with a parent, ethnic Azeri, Kvemo Kartli).

Part of the Georgian respondents agreed that the Georgian language syllabus must be improved. They shared the view that studying in a Georgian university could improve integration prospects of ethnic minorities.

“Programs for teaching Georgian in non-Georgian schools must be improved so that children have a real chance to enter a Georgian university. It is the responsibility of schools to give children adequate knowledge” (Interview with a representative of a resource centre, Kvemo Kartli).

Some respondents claimed that Georgian was taught quite efficiently in their school. But such views were a rare exception and usually concerned urban schools. Inefficient teaching of Georgian is mostly a problem of rural schools.

“I would like to boast that our school provides top-notch Georgian language skills. A lot of school activities are carried out in Georgian. Pupils speak Georgian fluently, thanks to the school’s efficient teaching methodologies. Our teachers are quite qualified and experienced” (Interview with a teacher, Kvemo Kartli).

Representatives of resource centres insisted that Georgian language textbooks for non-Georgian schools and learning conditions were quite good. Non-Georgian schools simply need to adopt a correct approach to the problem, they said. “The textbooks are excellent – even a Chinese can learn Georgian in two days using them. Nothing is impossible for a willing heart”.

However, when asked about problems of the teachers of Georgian, the same respondent answered: “Where do you see teachers of Georgian? Nobody is willing to teach Georgian in such remote schools”. The answer suggests that some representatives of resource centres are not fully aware of the problem. If there are no teachers of Georgian, how can “willing hearts” learn the language?

Non-Georgian respondents emphasised that apart from acquiring sufficient Georgian proficiency, they needed to be treated equally with Georgians.

“We want be equal to Georgians in Georgia. We are not in the same league today. Even if I spoke Georgian fluently and had excellent education, I could not get a job because I’m ethnic Armenian. In Georgia I’m Armenian; in Armenia I’m regarded as Georgian; and I cannot travel to Russia because there are too many obstacles” (Interview with a deputy school director, the board chairman, Samtskhe-Javakheti).

9.4. Bilingual education

According to part of the respondents, bilingual education is one of the efficient solutions to the problem of poor Georgian proficiency. Several schools have already adopted bilingual education programs. The idea has both opponents and supporters.

A large number of the respondents (especially ethnic minorities) approved of bilingual education. In their opinion, if bilingual education begins in the elementary grades, non-Georgian children will certainly have a sufficient command of Georgian by the time they leave school.

“Our school has established a bilingual education program in Grades I and II. Pupils speak Georgian quite well. If we had been taught Georgian in our childhood by similar programs, we would speak the language fluently now” (Interview with a school board member, a teacher, an Armenian school, Samtskhe).

Supporters of bilingual education emphasised that local residents were willing and ready to send their children to bilingual schools. But there are some problems: there are no respective textbooks and adequately trained teachers, etc.

“We have bilingual education classes in our school, but we lack textbooks, while the available textbooks contain a lot of mistakes” (Interview with a teacher, Javakheti).

A relatively small number of the respondents doubted that non-Georgian children would be able to cope with linguistic requirements of bilingual education. It would be more useful, in their words, to spend more hours per week on Georgian lessons. Almost all respondents said that it was essential to improve the effectiveness of the teaching of Georgian.

“Bilingual education programs will certainly impose considerable strain on pupils. It would be better to teach Georgian five days a week. The teaching should apply a wide variety of tools:

video lessons, fun lessons, for instance cartoons, etc.” (Interview with a teacher, ethnic Azeri, Kvemo Kartli).

Some respondents feared that if bilingual education began in the elementary grades, children would “forget” their native language and cultural identity.

A rival proposal – to introduce bilingual education only in top grades – also had supporters and opponents. Supporters deemed that history and geography should be taught in Georgian.

“I support bilingual education. I think, for instance, that history and geography of Georgia should be taught in Georgian. But it is only desirable, not necessary. Apart from language skills, Georgian history and geography lessons are essential for the development of pupils’ civil consciousness. But they should not be forced to learn these subjects in Georgian. A compromise solution should be found” (Interview with a parent, Kvemo Kartli).

Opponents emphasised that teaching any subject in Georgian in schools where neither pupils nor teachers understand Georgian well enough (or speak at all) would have zero positive effect. Although they are not against bilingual education per se, they think that in the current reality the idea is simply not feasible for most of the schools.

“It’s a bit early for bilingual education. Pupils have difficulty learning, for instance, history. They should master the language first” (Interview with a teacher, Kvemo Kartli).

9.5. The Georgian language textbook “Tavtavi”

The Georgian language textbook “Tavtavi” received positive appraisal from almost all respondents. In their words, among the Georgian language textbooks they know, it is the best of all. Another positive aspect was, according to some respondents, that schools received the textbook for free. Part of the respondents emphasised that their schools were awaiting impatiently the Part III of the textbook and said they envied other schools, which already had all three parts.

“Tavtavi is a very good textbook. Wherever used, it invariably has a considerable effect. Pupils are already able to communicate in Georgian” (Interview with a teacher of Georgian, an Azeri school, Kvemo Kartli).

“Tavtavi is well structured, coherent and very helpful. No textbook is better today” (Interview with a teacher, Kvemo Kartli).

Schools and resource centres are often approached by young local residents asking how they can get the textbook.

“Tavtavi is a very popular textbook. Apart from schools, ordinary residents also often inquire whether they can get it. They are now waiting for Part III” (Interview with a representative of a resource centre, Javakheti).

Some respondents underlined that non-Georgian schools were not the only beneficiaries of the textbook. In their words, it is widely applied in other secondary and higher educational institutions such as, for instance, the American School, and in Georgian language courses organised by NGOs. According to one of the respondents, Tavtavi is in demand even in foreign countries, where it is used to teach Georgian as a foreign language. The textbook was praised by representatives of resource centres too.

“Everybody have only good words for Tavtavi. We’ve received only positive feedback. We carried out five training workshops for teachers on the practical usage of the textbook and they were very satisfied” (Interview with a representative of a resource centre, Kvemo Kartli).

“We use Tavitavi to teach Georgian to children. The textbook is always delivered on time. We’ve received all three parts already. It’s very good that the textbook is free of charge. Few local residents can afford to buy it” (Interview with a teacher of an elementary school, Javakheti).

Respondents’ answers suggested that efficiency of the textbook varied by school, as different schools have different levels of pupil achievement and teacher qualification. Some respondents said that the textbook was hard to understand for pupils. Others – mainly teachers of urban schools (maybe because the Georgian proficiency is higher there) – had entirely opposite opinion, claiming that it was quite easy.

“We use Tavitavi in the education process. It is very easy to understand for our school’s children” (Interview with a deputy director, Bolnisi, Kvemo Kartli).

A considerable number of the supporters of the Tavitavi complained that the textbook was in short supply and only a few teachers were qualified and skilled enough to use the textbook efficiently.

“I like this textbook very much. But there are no qualified teachers of the language in some rural communities, while in the others teachers need respective training” (Interview with a school board member, Armenian school, Javakheti).

The respondents emphasised that efficiency of the textbook depended greatly on teacher qualification. Unfortunately, in their words, the government does not seem concerned with the problem.

“It’s not a proper approach to teaching Georgian. At first they completed Part I of the Tavitavi and only afterwards teachers got training on the textbook. The teachers should have been trained before the studies began. Now schools have begun receiving Part III of the Tavitavi already, but teachers have not been trained yet. All teachers must undergo training in this methodology. But nothing has been done to this end yet” (Interview with a school director, ethnic Georgian, Kvemo Kartli).

Part of the respondents had questions about the teaching process. They wondered, for instance, whether Tavitavi provided sufficient knowledge and language skills for the national matriculation exams; whether it could help non-Georgian school leavers compete successfully with their Georgian counterparts in the exams; whether it conformed with the examination program. Some respondents did not believe that Tavitavi could ensure adequate language proficiency for the exams. Others were certain that it could, provided all three parts of the textbook were completed successfully. It seems that non-Georgian schools are not adequately informed about this problem too.

“Tavitavi is a good textbook. But if it does not correspond with the examination program, pupils will have to find another one to prepare for admission exams. For instance, if Shota Rustaveli’s works are not taught in Azeri schools, how can Azeri children pass exams in what they did not learn?” (Interview with a parent, Kvemo Kartli).

It may be concluded that quality of education is generally higher in Georgian schools in comparison with non-Georgian ones. This aspect has a negative effect on the teaching of Georgian in these schools. That is why ethnic minorities are sure that their children cannot get sufficient knowledge of Georgian in school and, therefore, have few chances of getting higher education in Georgia.

The respondents emphasised that the curriculum of non-Georgian schools was different from that of Georgian ones. This is another reason why Georgian applicants have an advantage over their non-Georgian counterparts in the national matriculation exams.

10. Efficiency of the reforms directly related to the education process

A significant part of the education reform covers the schooling process. That is why the survey was focused on major components of the process – teaching methodologies, school textbooks, educational programs, planning of the education process, etc – that have a profound effect on daily school life.

10.1. New teaching methodologies – pupil-centred education process

Respondents were more or less aware of this component of the reform. Here, too, their opinions greatly differed. A small number of the respondents knew about the new teaching methodologies. A majority of the respondents had only a general idea of these methods, while another small part of the respondents was not familiar with the methodological innovations at all. According to most of the respondents, schools do not get new methodological guidebooks in time. In their words, the success of new methodologies depends entirely on whether schools have enough initiative, capabilities and interest in embracing the novelties. Those teachers who more or less regularly attend training workshops and seminars are better informed about the new methodologies, while teachers who know little about them are mostly from non-Georgian schools which stick to old teaching practices and continue to use outdated textbooks.

“The teaching methodology has changed. Those who underwent training know that teachers can now use different methods in classroom: team work, learning in pairs, etc. But we continue to use old methods. We know little of the reform. We were not invited to the training” (Focus group discussion, a teacher, ethnic Azeri, Kvemo Kartli).

Attitudes towards the new teaching methodologies are different. For instance, a majority of the respondents positively evaluated such new methods as interactive lessons and pupil-centred learning. Other methods – discussion, team learning, etc – were praised by a large number of the respondents. In their opinion, these innovations promote creative thinking among pupils and increase their personal freedom and, ultimately, improve the quality of education.

“The new teaching methodology is quite acceptable. The learning process has become more creative. I like team learning. Lessons have become more interesting; pupils have more freedom. Earlier they were within certain bounds” (Interview with a teacher, Ajaria)

“I like the new methodology. Pupils must be more active in classroom than teachers. Earlier lessons were less interesting because they were like a lecture” (Interview with a school board member, a parent, Imereti).

Pupils also complimented the pupil-centred approach to education.

“We use team learning in school and I like such lessons. We have more freedom to express our views” (Interview with pupils, Ajaria).

A large number of teachers were satisfied that they were given freedom in planning their lessons. They can now vary their approaches and methods to suit different tasks and situations in different classes. They also like that priority is given to pupils’ demonstrating skills and understanding, not parrot-fashion learning. Rather than memorising facts, it is more important that pupils learn and understand concepts within any subject.

“Teachers can now take an individual approach to every class and every pupil. In Soviet times there was one common program for all classes, no matter what was the level of their achievement. Today I can use different methods in best-achieving and worst-achieving classes. I like the reform” (Interview with a teacher of the Russian language and literature, Azeri school, Kvemo Kartli).

“The lessons are no longer focused on the repetition of ‘know-what’ knowledge. It’s good. We don’t require pupils to learn a text without understanding it. Emphasis is laid on comprehension. It was not the case in the past” (Interview with a teacher of Georgian, Imereti).

Part of the respondents complained that they did not have an opportunity to get training and use the new methodologies. Some respondents disapproved of the new methods. In their opinion, the learning process will be less efficient, if pupils become more active in classroom. Old Soviet methods were quite effective, they claimed.

“Earlier teachers were active during lessons, while pupils remained passive. I think it was a right approach. Well, let pupils become more active. But teachers should not watch from the sidelines. Team learning is not suitable for every situation. Fun learning will not always give positive results. This methodology needs improving. Traditional teaching methods should not be rejected outright. Old and new methods can be used simultaneously. Old does not mean bad” (Interview with a teacher, Imereti).

Some respondents claimed that the pupil-centred approach and more freedom in classroom may sometimes take an exaggerate form, while team learning can lead to anarchy and lack of discipline. Some respondents argued that although the new methodology was good, the current Georgian school, and the society in general, is not prepared to accept the new relations and freedom in classroom.

“Freedom in classroom is a shortcoming. Our society is not ready yet for the kind of freedom American pupils have during their lessons” (Interview with a teacher of history, Georgian school, Kvemo Kartli).

A small number of the respondents said that nothing had actually changed in school. In their words, similar methods were applied in the past too, albeit on a smaller scale.

10.2. Teacher-pupil relations

Part of the respondents underlined that the reform had changed relations in school (between teachers, pupils, parents, directors, etc). Today, in their words, these relations are based on cooperation, though not in every school. Part of the respondents positively assessed changes in the teacher-pupil relationship; the rest criticised them. The former said that the teacher-pupil relations became more friendly and constructive. The new teaching methodologies and the pupil-centred approach helped pupils develop independent thinking ability and gave them more freedom.

“The teacher-pupil relationship has improved. Today relations between them are quite friendly. In our time pupils were afraid of teachers. It’s no longer the case. They have more freedom and fewer complexes. My generation had such complexes” (Interview with a teacher, Imereti).

A relatively small, yet significant, number of the respondents complained that pupils had become too unfettered and less respectful of teachers. The education process suffered as a result, they said.

“I think pupils have more rights and freedoms today than teachers do. Pupils have too many rights today: they shall not be searched for instance. But we must be able to search them at least once a week. Freedom sometimes fuels insolence and bad manners, but we are prohibited to reprimand them in the presence of other teachers, pupils, or parents. So what should we do?” (Interview with a teacher, Ajaria).

Respondents from rural communities, especially ethnic enclaves, said that there were few noticeable changes in the teacher-pupil relationship. It seems that rural schools, especially non-Georgian ones, continue using old methodologies. Nevertheless, many of these respondents admitted that pupils were given more freedom, while the education process became more creative.

10.3. The national school curriculum

The survey revealed that some teachers, mainly from rural and non-Georgian schools, knew little, if anything, about the national curriculum. Respectively, they do not adhere to the national curriculum during the teaching process. Some respondents said they were unable to abide by the curriculum because respective textbooks were unavailable. Part of the respondents from Georgian schools were familiar with the new national curriculum. Others could not say what was the difference between the old and new curricula.

- *Assessment of the new national curriculum by representatives of Georgian schools*

Even those respondents who had enough knowledge of the new national curriculum voiced differing opinions on the subject. A majority of the teachers and parents criticised the national curriculum. In their opinion, the new curriculum is “oversimplified” and incomplete, and does not ensure a coherent and efficient education process. Some respondents claimed that the old curriculum was better than the new one.

“The old curriculum was better. I know that Americans bought and use it now in their educational institutions, while we have adopted their programs” (Interview with a teacher, Ajaria).

The respondents pointed out that the new school textbooks and the matriculation examination program did not correspond with the new national curriculum.

“This curriculum and the current education process in school do not give children the knowledge they need to pass the national matriculation exams successfully. The exam questions do not correspond with what children are taught in school” (Interview with a parent, Ajaria).

Only a small number of the respondents said that the new curriculum was congruent with the matriculation examination program. Part of the respondents could not say whether new school textbooks complied with the matriculation examination program. However, a majority of the respondents agreed that pupils did not get enough knowledge in school – mainly because of the low quality of education – and needed private tuition to pass the national matriculation exams successfully.

- *Assessment of the new national curriculum by representatives of non-Georgian schools*

A majority of non-Georgian schools have not received the new national curriculum yet and, respectively, are unable to give pupils the knowledge they need to prepare for the national matriculation exams.

“We have not received any program from the ministry. We had a curriculum in Soviet times. Now we are told that we should create such programs by ourselves” (Interview with a teacher, Azeri school, Kvemo Kartli).

“We have not received the new curriculum yet. We continue to use the old one” (Interview with a teacher, Azeri school, Kvemo-Kartli).

Those respondents who were familiar with the new program had their own view on the problem. Part of them positively assessed the curriculum, while the others described it as inefficient.

“I don’t like the new curriculum. It is irrelevant and does not comply with standards. That is why pupils need private tuition to prepare for university admission exams” (Interview with a school board member, a teacher, Javakheti).

“Curricula for Armenian and Russian schools have not been developed yet. That is why we abide by what we learnt at training workshops” (Interview with a teacher, Kvemo Kartli).

Part of the respondents did not know which curriculum was used in Georgian schools and which one they should apply in their work. It seems that resource centres do not provide non-Georgian schools with full information. Representatives of resource centres claim that poor Georgian proficiency is the main reason of the problem.

10.4. Integrated teaching and the introduction of trimester schedule in schools

The respondents viewed the two themes – integrated teaching and the trimester schedule – as interconnected. Most of them disapproved of the new scheme, which means combining several subjects into one (history-geography, chemistry-biology-physics) and teaching only one integrated subject per trimester. The respondents provided two major reasons against integrated teaching: few school teachers have respective qualification and integrated teaching is not efficient. At the same time, however, respondents expressed different opinions about the efficiency of the new method. Part of them said that teachers should have received respective training in advance, before the new system was enacted.

“The integrated teaching is a problem. For instance, history and geography were combined into a single subject. But current teachers have qualification to teach only one subject, either history or geography. There are no teachers capable of teaching both simultaneously. Teachers of natural sciences are likely to face the biggest challenge” (Interview with a teacher, Imereti).

Opponents provided different arguments against the new methodology. Part of them said that every subject should be taught independently and any attempt to integrate them into a single one was a mistake. Most of the opponents tried to prove their point by claiming that the education process has become inefficient, while pupils no longer get sufficient knowledge and skills. Besides, in their words, there are no respective textbooks.

“Geography and history must never be combined. History is a social science, while geography is a natural science. It is also not a good idea to incorporate chemistry, physics, and biology into a single subject. Children have great difficulty learning such subjects (Interview with a teacher of geography, Samtskhe).

“I don’t like integrated teaching. I don’t understand how physics and chemistry can blend together to form a single subject. Children will be hardly able to learn it. And integrated textbooks are still unavailable” (Interview with a teacher, Georgian school, Samtskhe).

“I don’t want my child to be taught history-geography as a single subject. If so, he will be uneducated in both subjects” (Interview with a teacher, Ajaria).

A small number of the respondents argued that the new method had both advantages and disadvantages.

“Integrated teaching has both positive and negative aspects. On the one hand, it saves time; on the other hand, it reduces the quality of education. It is boring for children to sit and learn physics every day. After all, it is a technical subject. Besides, at the end of the year they usually cannot remember what they were taught at the beginning of the term” (Interview with a parent, a teacher, Imereti).

Proponents of the new method had their own arguments, which sometimes echoed those of the opponents but were expressed in reverse. In their words, integrated teaching was time-efficient, very effective (pupils have better achievements), and cost-cutting for the publishers of school textbooks. Besides, pupils have more time to retake evaluation tests in case of bad marks, etc.

“Teaching geography and history as a whole is a positive development. Both subjects are taught simultaneously, by a single textbook. Such learning is more interesting. Besides, pupils need to buy only one textbook instead of two – hence fewer expenses” (Interview with a teacher, Ajaria).

“The trimester-based system is better because learning a subject, as well as evaluation of pupil achievements, takes less time” (Interview with a parent, Samtskhe).

10.5. Rescheduling of the school term

Respondents attached considerable importance to the schedule of the school term, namely to its start and the end dates. A majority of them thought that the school term should begin in September and end in May, just like before the reform. A large number of the respondents, especially representatives of rural schools, emphasised that it was very convenient for them to begin schooling on September 1 and end it in late May due to peculiarities of local climate and because they needed to run household farming.

Part of the respondents maintained that the school term was unreasonably extended. Besides, in their words, the real school term was shorter in all but a few schools.

“I wonder what is the reasoning behind the decision to extend the school year. Children do not go to school anyway. Lessons are often cancelled in top grades. It’s nothing but self-deception” (Interview with a representative of a resource centre, Imereti).

10.6. The problem of school textbooks

When looking into the problem of textbooks, respondents highlighted the following aspects: the book cover design, the price and availability of alternatives, the contents, compliance with education standards, etc. Respondents assessed the textbooks by various parameters (price, format, contents, and design). Their assessments varied widely.

- *Alternative textbooks/the possibility of choice*

As a result of the reform, schools can now choose which books to use from the list of officially authorised (by the education ministry) textbooks. It is up to the curriculum board of a school to make the choice. The new practice has both supporters and critics. A large number of the respondents positively evaluated the possibility for schools to choose freely the textbooks. At the same time, however, quite a few supporters had some critical remarks. In their words, the underlying idea is good but the procedure is inadequate and inefficient. Schools, especially rural ones, are unable to make an informed choice because they have few opportunities to check and evaluate the textbooks in advance. In reality, therefore, the selection of textbooks is pure guesswork. In some subjects the number of alternative textbooks is too large for teachers to read and evaluate all of them in time for the start of the school term. The respondents insisted that the education ministry, the authors and/or the publishers should supply the textbooks to schools long in advance.

“It’s good that teachers have a choice, something they had not in the past. Besides, there were no alternatives before – all schools had to use the same textbooks. But teachers need time to pick a best book. Schools must get textbooks in advance so that the curriculum board is able to review them and choose the one they deem as most appropriate. They are unable to do it at present. School libraries should have every textbook at hand. The publishers should supply textbooks to resource centres early enough for the latter to deliver them to schools timely” (Interview with a teacher, Imereti).

Opponents argued that too many choices were confusing for both teachers and parents. In their opinion, the education process would be much more efficient, if all schools used the same textbooks and syllabi. In their words, there must be only one, well designed and elaborate, textbook for each subject and the textbooks must be mandatory for all schools. They argued that choosing a right textbook was a rather hard task for schools. They also alleged that the new scheme was a breeding ground for corruption, as publishers were tempted to strike illegal deals with the ministry to promote their textbooks.

- *The size and a visual appeal of the textbooks*

A majority of the respondents complained about inadequate format – the size and weight – of the textbooks. Most of the textbooks are too large and heavyweight. It is very burdensome for children – especially for pupils of rural schools who have to walk several kilometres every day from their home village to a neighbouring one where their schools is located – to carry so many printed materials to and from school and between classes. The respondents proposed to reduce the size and weight of the textbooks.

“Five or six textbooks weigh a lot. Fifth graders have to carry this load every day for three kilometres” (Interview with a school director, Ajaria).

Part of the respondents pointed out a very low print quality of the textbooks.

- *The price of the textbooks*

Almost all respondents emphasised that the textbooks were too expensive and unaffordable for a majority of pupils (or their parents). Many pupils in classroom do not have all the textbooks they need. As a rule, only a few of them have all textbooks, while the others xerox or borrow them for some time. Part of the schools (for instance in Imereti) set up a textbook rental service to solve the problem. But this solution is not very efficient as schools often change textbooks (choose another one) with every new term. That is why some schools continue using old textbooks along with newly selected ones in order to help those pupils who are unable to buy or rent the new textbooks.

- *The content of the textbooks*

The content of the textbooks is viewed as one of the most significant aspects. There were both positive and negative opinions, but most of the correspondents were critical of the content of the school textbooks.

Part of the respondents were satisfied with the content of the new textbooks and assessed them as interesting, well illustrated, and designed to stimulate critical thinking. Critics censured textbooks for virtually every subject and every grade.

Respondents expressed different opinions on textbooks for different grades and subjects. Some textbooks were praised by a majority of the respondents, while other textbooks were mostly criticised. Many respondents blamed the education ministry for giving the authors too much freedom and for not controlling them. In their words, part of the textbooks do not comply with the national curriculum, contain errors, are too simple or too complex, require to search for additional information, etc. Respondents also criticised the content of textbooks for different grades.

“I don’t like the current geography textbook. It is incoherent, albeit well illustrated, and some essential themes are left out. It means that pupils need to search for additional information, a clear indicator that the textbook is not good” (Interview with a representative of a resource centre, Ajaria).

“The biology syllabus is nearly the same in grades VI, VII, VIII, and IX. Pupils repeat the same themes again and again. They acquire skills, but not knowledge. Every textbook begins with a cell and ends with ecology. The teaching methodology applied in the book is good per se, but there is no biology inside” (Interview with a teacher, Kvemo Kartli).

Part of the respondents claimed that the contents of the textbooks for different grades – and in different subjects – were inadequate to the respective levels of pupils. Some respondents complained about numerous errors in the textbooks.

“There are technical errors and inconsistencies in the textbooks. One geography textbook teaches that Alazani River is bigger than Mtkvari River; another book claims that the opposite is true. So what should pupils do? Which version should they choose as the correct answer to the question?” (Interview with a school director, Ajaria).

Apart from the contents of the textbooks, respondents assessed – and often criticised – new instructions and guides to the usage of the books.

“The geography teacher told my son that according to instructions in the textbook there was no need for homework and all materials should be learnt in classroom. I inquired about this rule in our school and a teacher told me that this method had proved ineffective” (Interview with a parent, a teacher, Imereti).

The textbooks contain practical exercises that cannot be implemented without the use of Internet and/or library. But a majority of pupils and teachers, especially in rural communities, do not have access to the web. Some textbooks are useless because schools lack technical equipment needed to teach the respective subject. In the opinion of a large number of the respondents, including current pupils and school leavers, old Soviet textbooks were better than the present ones.

- *The Georgian language and literature textbook*

The teaching of the Georgian language and literature was one of the major concerns for respondents. A large number of the teachers of the Georgian language and literature complained that the current textbooks were hardly an efficient instrument to teach Georgian grammar and Georgian literature. For instance, in their words, the old Georgian literature is not represented in the textbooks properly and pupils do not get respective knowledge as a result.

“Some new textbooks are good, but some are not. I think, for instance, that the Georgian language textbook for Grade VII is very bad. Actually, it says nothing about grammar and, in addition, oversimplifies the matter. It’s tell-a-tale book” (Interview with a teacher, Javakheti).

“I don’t like the 7th Grade Georgian language textbook. It includes few classic works but a lot of myths and tales. Only five lines are cited from “Vepkhvistsqaosani”. On the other hand, it’s good that the book teaches how to write a letter, what is prologue and what is epilogue” (Interview with a parent, a teacher, Imereti).

“The Georgian language textbook contains little useful information and, besides, is hard to understand. It’s unthinkable to use a remix of the Natsarkekia tale to teach Georgian to Grade VII pupils” (Interview with a teacher, Imereti).

“In Grade VIII “Bashiachuki” is the only works to be taught in full, from the beginning to the end. The rest are represented only by brief extracts. It’s impossible to learn Georgian with this textbook” (Interview with a teacher of the Georgian language and literature, Georgian school, Kvemo Kartli).

A considerable number of the respondents from Georgian schools and provinces claimed that the quality of the teaching of the Georgian language and literature, as well as the quality of textbooks, declined as a result of the reform. They also pointed out that Georgian language lessons were given fewer hours per week. It means, in their opinion, that new generations will be unable to learn Georgian traditions and culture.

- *History textbooks*

Part of the respondents expressed concern over the history textbooks and methodology to teach history in school. They thought that the current history textbooks did not provide adequate information about the history of Georgia.

“It’s very good that we teach children histories of many foreign countries. But we are Georgians and must pay more attention to the history of Georgia” (Interview with an acting school director, Imereti).

Part of the respondents from non-Georgian schools claimed that the history textbooks were politicised and biased against ethnic minorities, and included some controversial data. For instance, according to an ethnic Armenian respondent, former textbooks portrayed Armenians and Georgians as friendly nations – “Today they say that we are not friends any longer. We are facing problems as a result”. Obviously, the respondents tended to have an ethnocentrist attitude towards the textbooks translated from Georgian. They also criticised the language and the degree of complexity of the history textbooks.

“I’m a history teacher. The history textbook is written by Georgian authors and translated into Russian by Georgian translators. But it is inadequate to the pupils’ level. The language of translation is hard to understand as it is dominated by scientific vocabulary. Other teachers also say that it is a bad translation” (Interview with a teacher of history, Kvemo Kartli).

10.7. The problem of textbooks for non-Georgian schools

The problem of textbooks is more serious for non-Georgian schools (respondents included representatives of Armenian, Azeri, Georgian and Russian schools). Part of the textbooks for non-Georgian schools are written in Georgian and translated into respective minority languages. Other textbooks are delivered – usually free of charge (as a gift) – by respective historical homelands of minorities. So non-Georgian schools use a combination of various textbooks: Georgian textbooks, those supplied by a neighbouring country, and some old Soviet ones.

“We use old Soviet textbooks in my subject. We cite particular historical dates and events from the textbooks and children write them down. We have respective permission: we were told that we could use old textbooks until new ones were available” (Interview with a teacher of history, Azeri school, Kvemo Kartli).

It is noteworthy that some schools have, in the same vein, a mixed curriculum. In fact, they still rely on the old curriculum because they don’t have a complete package of textbooks published by Georgia. Armenian respondents emphasised that Armenian schools had not received new textbooks and programs yet and continued using old ones.

“Over the last two years we have received textbooks from the Russian embassy. We were told that as long as we knew the themes we could use whichever textbook we like to teach them. The main problem is that we don’t have a curriculum and teaching is largely based on teachers’ experience. Things were better in the past, when we had a curriculum” (Interview with a teacher, Russian school, Kvemo Kartli).

As a result of the problem, the education process is hampered, while non-Georgian school leavers have fewer chances to enrol in a Georgian university. Pupils of non-Georgian schools made it clear that a majority of them would seek higher education abroad (in Armenia, Azerbaijan, etc), since they did not speak Georgian and would be unable to pass admission exams in Georgian.

Some teachers are trying to deal with the problem on their own. In some subjects they use Georgian and Russian textbooks simultaneously and translate the lessons into the pupils’ native language (Azeri, a case from an Azeri school of Kvemo Kartli) by themselves.

Like their Georgian counterparts, quite logically, pupils and parents of non-Georgian schools also complained about high prices of the textbooks. Only the textbooks for Grade I are free of charge; the rest should be purchased by parents. Both teachers and parents admitted that textbooks were unaffordable for many.

“The textbooks are very expensive: 10-12 GEL per each. The complete package costs 220 GEL. Azeri residents cannot afford to buy it at present. Only the 1st Grade textbooks were distributed for free” (Interview with a teacher, ethnic Azeri, Kvemo Kartli).

The textbooks supplied by the Georgian government received mostly negative comments from non-Georgian respondents. Part of the respondents claimed that the new textbooks were hard to use and the old ones were apparently better.

“Earlier we used to teach elementary grades with textbooks published in Azerbaijan. Today we have Georgia-made textbooks. They are interesting and well illustrated to help children better understand the content. But I don’t like the maths textbook. There are a lot of pictures and only a few exercises. That is why we have to use exercises from old textbooks” (Interview with a teacher of an elementary school, ethnic Azeri, Kvemo Kartli).

Teachers of the Russian language and literature also were dissatisfied with their textbooks.

“We used to get the Russian language textbooks from Azerbaijan. The ministry has recently begun publishing textbooks for non-Georgian schools. I have not had an opportunity yet to take a look at the 10th Grade textbook. The textbook for Grade IX is quite good, but the textbook for Grade IV is completely inappropriate” (Interview with a teacher, Azeri school, Kvemo Kartli).

Their complaints were similar to those of the Georgian language and literature teachers.

“There is a tendency to teach a minimum level of the Russian classical literature, while grammar is actually ignored” (Interview with a parent, Azeri school, Kvemo Kartli).

It is noteworthy that part of the respondents (mainly teachers) had no idea what problems other schools faced and which textbooks (or programs) other teachers used. A teacher of elementary grades at an Azeri school knew nothing about the textbooks (the publisher, the language of the textbook, etc) applied in top grades of the school.

According to representatives of resource centres, non-Georgian schools receive new textbooks and programs in time but fail to implement respective reforms. For their part, representatives of non-Georgian schools claimed that they were doing their best to comply with new standards and norms. However, in their words, the reforms are slow because non-Georgian schools have received little assistance and attention from resource centres (especially in relation to pilot classes).

“We do use the new curriculum. But I don’t know what other schools do. Resource centres are anything but helpful. I’m frustrated with their activities” (Interview with a teacher, a school board member, Kvemo Kartli).

10.8. The problems of pilot classes

Problems of pilot classes were one of the major themes of the research. Several schools have begun piloting the new textbooks and the new curriculum. According to the respondents, the pilot classes have encountered different problems. A large number of the respondents said that the idea was good but its implementation was flawed. Namely, they criticised the decision to start the piloting process at three different grades simultaneously without any preparation. In their opinion, the piloting should have started in the elementary grades.

“It was a mistake to carry out the piloting scheme only in Grades I, VII and X. It’s impossible. The piloting should have started in Grade I and continued into the next levels and with the same methodology. There was no need to include Grades VII and X in the process” (Interview with a teacher, Azeri school, Kvemo Kartli).

The respondents positively evaluated the pilot textbooks but complained, at the same time, that they were not readily available.

“Pilot classes have got new chemistry and physics textbooks. We receive the new pilot textbooks from the ministry every year. Other classes continue using old textbooks supplied from Baku. I like the new textbooks. I wish they were used in every class” (Interview with a teacher of chemistry, ethnic Azeri, Kvemo Kartli).

The problem is that the pilot textbooks are quite expensive and many pupils (or their parents) cannot afford them. Besides, the new textbooks are often delivered to the schools with long delays. That is why schools keep on teaching by old textbooks and it is touch-and-go whether the piloting process will succeed.

“In pilot classes we must use new textbooks in biology, chemistry, physics, and music. The prices for the textbooks are quite high: 10-15 GEL for each. But we have not received them yet. Book stores also do not have them in stock. That is why old textbooks, published in Azerbaijan, are still in use here” (Interview with a teacher, Azeri school, Kvemo Kartli).

Schools have requested the new textbooks from recourse centres, but the latter demanded full advance payment (cash before delivery). For their part, representatives of the resource centres claimed:

“If they don’t have the textbooks, it’s not my problem. If they set up pilot classes, they must know. The absence of textbooks is a school’s problem” (Interview with a representative of a resource centre).

10.9. The new school grading system

- *The ten-mark system to assess pupil achievement in top grades*

In the framework of the reform the old five-mark assessment system was replaced with a new, ten-mark system to assess pupil achievement. Respondents had different opinions about the new system, from negative (a majority of the respondents) to positive (a small number of the respondents). Some respondents said that it made no difference to them. Under the new system teachers should assess pupil achievement on a scale of one to ten, using certain criteria. But a majority of the respondents could not specify the criteria, their number and essence, even though they applied the new system in their work.

Part of the respondents supported the new 10-mark system because, in their words, it could help teachers to make more fair and adequate assessment of pupils’ knowledge and skills. A large number of the respondents said that at first they had great difficulty adapting to the new scheme. However, in their words, they have already got used to it. Some teachers are still unable to calculate the marks properly and ask other teachers to help them.

“Philologists ask mathematicians to help them calculate the marks correctly. Sometimes pupils themselves help their teachers with the calculations. It’s a bit ridiculous” (Focus group discussion, a teacher, Kvemo Kartli).

A majority of the respondents criticised the new system for being too complex and time consuming. Benefits of the new system were unclear to them. At the same time, pupils do not understand the meaning of the new assessment.

“The ten-mark system is too burdensome and time consuming. It’s hard to make a component-based assessment. I don’t understand why we should need to calculate the percentage. It takes one week to complete the assessment” (Interview with a teacher, Imereti).

“These new marks and grades impede rather than ease our work. What a generation of Georgians are we going to bring up with these marks? If a pupil gets fewer than five marks, a teacher must write an explanatory statement and take measures to increase achievements of the class. That is why teachers are tempted to give higher marks to avoid trouble” (Focus group discussion, a teacher, Kvemo Kartli).

Part of the respondents claimed that this component of the reform, like some others, was implemented only formally. In reality, in their words, teachers continue using the old system of assessment: at first they determine the marks in accordance with the old scheme – 3, 4, or 5 – and then simply multiply them by two.

“Teachers still use the old grading system and then simply multiply the marks by two” (Interview with a school director, Ajaria).

Some teachers (from both Georgian and non-Georgian schools) said that their schools had not adopted the new system yet.

- *Assessment of pupil achievement in elementary grades*

There was a considerable difference of opinion on the newly adopted system of pupil achievement assessment at the elementary level. Part of the teachers and parents found it inappropriate that in elementary grades numerical marks were no longer used to assess pupils’ achievement. In their opinion, numerical marks are a stronger motivating factor than the currently used assessment symbols – flowers and stars. Opponents of the new system argued that if learning results were not checked and marked, pupils would not have much motivation to learn.

A relatively small number of the respondents positively evaluated the replacement of numerical marks with symbols – stars and flowers. In their opinion, the new system is more effective and beneficial for pupils than the old one because it makes learning fun.

10.10. The 12-year secondary education

The 12-year compulsory secondary education was introduced in Georgia, as part of the reform, in 2008. This move also drew a wide variety of opinion – from negative to positive. A majority of the respondents disapproved of the change. A small number of the respondents supported the new system because, in their words, it was closer to European standards and could improve the quality of education. Part of the supporters emphasised, however, that the 12-year secondary education would bring positive results only if schools were adequately prepared and the education process was adapted accordingly. Today, in their words, the education process in top grades has been disorganised in many schools.

“I think that the 12-year education system is good, provided it is not like the current one in which 60% of pupils do not attend school. The 12-year education is good only if schools have clear functions and educate pupils well enough to pass matriculation exams without the need to take private tuition” (Interview with a representative of a resource centre, Imereti).

Part of the respondents thought that the 12-year education would make sense only if the new curriculum included crafts (dress making, needlework, moulding, etc) and if pupils would be able to acquire a profession in school. Some schools have such experience (for instance, one of the schools of Imereti has received a grant to set up a bee-farming course for pupils).

A majority of the respondents disliked the 12-year secondary education system. In their opinion, schools are not prepared for such a system yet (there are no respective textbooks and curriculum). Respondents from rural communities were especially dissatisfied with the extension of the education because early marriages are common in the countryside. They were sure that the education process would be largely formal in the Grade XII, just like it is in the Grade XI today.

“I don’t understand the 12-year education. The 11th grade pupils miss lessons en masse on a regular basis. Does anybody believe that the 12th grade pupils will attend school? I cannot understand why the new system was introduced without developing textbooks and curriculum first” (Interview with a teacher, Imereti).

Part of the respondents argued that an extra year of schooling would make no difference.

“Well, let’s educate kids for 12 years if it’s deemed appropriate. But I think that 10 years are quite enough” (Interview with an acting school director, a rural school, Imereti).

“The 12-year education is irrational yet. The curriculum is finished in the Grade XI and there is nothing more to learn” (Interview with a teacher of geography, Samtskhe).

Some respondents were flatly against the 12-year education because:

“The average life expectancy for our people is 60-65 years. If children need to go to school for 12 years, spend a couple of years on preparation afterwards, then get education, little time will be left for marriage and family life. I, for one, think that even the 11-year education is excessive” (Interview with a school board member, a teacher, Georgian school, Javakheti).

“Girls usually get married early in the region, in Grades IX-X. There will be no girls in the 12th Grade, or there will be mostly married girls and boys in classroom”. (Interview with a representative of a resource centre, Javakheti).

A small number of the respondents said it was no matter to them whether the schooling lasted 11 or 12 years. Respectively, they neither criticised nor welcomed the new system.

Pupils also differed over the issue. Some of them believed that the 12-year education would be beneficial for them, as they would be able to better prepare for matriculation exams. Others maintained that it was a mere waste of time.

Non-Georgian schools are not adequately informed about the 12-year education system. Some of them think that the new system is applicable only to Georgian schools. Others deem that non-Georgian schools will also have to adopt it but don’t know when. Many of them are certain that the last, 12th year of education, will focus on preparation for the matriculation exams. However, most of them admit that non-Georgian schools are not prepared for the 12-year education. In their words, the reform should begin in elementary grades and take account of regional specifics and opinions of school communities.

“We still don’t have the 12th grade textbooks for the next year. We don’t know what we should do. It’s a mistake; it’s not a proper beginning for the reform. The reform should begin in elementary grades, not in Grade VII or Grade X. I wonder whether the reform has any plan. They should ask us first whether we consider it acceptable. It’s unacceptable to me. The 12-year education is ineffective. You may rest assured that it will not bring positive results” (Interview with an acting school director, Kvemo Kartli).

The respondents emphasised that there were few girls among top graders in rural schools, especially in ethnic enclaves (Kvemo Kartli) – they either get married or have to drop out under pressure from their parents. Part of the respondents suggested that this problem needed more attention.

10.11. Certification and grade tests

A large number of the respondents did not like that secondary education certificates and results of grade tests were no longer taken into account during the matriculation exams. As a result, in their opinion, motivation to learn has declined in school. Some respondents claimed that the abolishment of grade tests had additional negative impact on the motivation of pupils. In fact, pupils tend to learn only those subjects today that are listed in the national matriculation examination program. But some respondents welcomed the cancellation of grade tests.

According to some respondents, several schools have restored the grade tests and the quality of education has improved there as a result.

“We have carried out the tests and achieved very good results. Children learn hard to prepare for the tests” (Interview with a teacher of Russian, Javakheti).

A small number of the respondents proposed to create a special reward system to improve motivation of pupils. For instance, in their words, best achieving pupils could be awarded with bonuses (in cash), valuable gifts (PC, a book, etc), or golden medals (such medals were given to pupils in the past), etc.

10.12. Attendance/attainment record sheet

Part of the respondents highlighted considerable uncertainty over attendance/attainment records among teachers. The rules to fill and maintain the attendance/attainment record sheet have changed several times recently. In the respondents’ opinion, pupil attendance and attainment must be tracked daily.

“We were told that old attendance/attainment sheets were no longer valid. They changed the rules repeatedly. Finally, they said that we could discard the sheets altogether and record the attendance/attainment data in a simple notebook. It’s not good that pupils no longer see the sheet with their daily scores on the table” (Interview with a school director, Kvemo Kartli).

10.13. The number of pupils per class

In the respondents’ opinion, to improve the efficiency of the education process the maximum number of pupils in each class must be limited. A majority of the respondents knew nothing about the new national standards for the maximum number of pupils in class and could not say whether the country had such standards at all. Teachers of overcrowded classes were concerned with the problem most of all. It is less of a problem in rural and small schools. Teachers and parents want the maximum number of pupils per class to be strictly determined. In their opinion, the education process will not be efficient if there are more than 20 pupils in a classroom.

10.14. Technical facilities of schools – Internet rooms, libraries, etc.

Respondents emphasised that some schools managed to upgrade their technical facilities in the framework of the reform. Many schools were repaired and well-equipped computer classes were set up there. Many other (especially rural) schools, however, either have outdated technical facilities or don’t have them at all. A majority of the schools don’t have libraries and computer classes, even though modern teaching methodologies cannot be applied without both. Some schools have set up and equipped computer classes but computer lessons are not held there because there are no teachers with respective qualification. Many schools do not have access to Internet. So, according to the respondents, the computerisation process is largely formal in part of the schools (the respondents also complained about low quality of repairs, despite quite large repair funds allocated by the government).

10.15. School uniforms

A large number of the respondents agreed that pupils must wear school uniforms in school. In their opinion, given the fact that a majority of the Georgian population live in dire straits nowadays, the uniforms (provided they are nice, convenient and fashionable) have a lot of potential benefits and can help solve a lot of problems for parents and pupils. Parents emphasised that apart from good quality and design, the uniforms must be affordable even for low-income families.

10.16 Relations between schools and non-educational institutions

Schools do not have active relations with non-educational institutions: local self-governments, NGOs, mass media, donor organisations, etc. Respondents did not know what kind of relations schools could maintain with such structures and how both sides could benefit from them. Only a few schools have received grants from donors, implemented a joint project with the local self-government or a NGO, or applied for help to a structure that was not part of the education ministry. The lack of knowledge and experience seems to be the main reason of the problem: schools don't know how to establish such relations. Resource centres and the education ministry rarely, if at all, inform schools about donor organisations and available grants. Respondents were able to specify only a few successful projects proposed by schools and sponsored by donors. A small number of the respondents argued that it was the responsibility of school directors, as managers, to address the problem.

“He must go to the right places to raise funds for the school and maintain good relations with the community, the municipal administration, the ministry, and NGOs in order to be able to get benefits for the school, such as donor-sponsored projects” (Interview with a representative of a resource centre, Imereti).

Some schools are exceptional from this viewpoint.

“Our school has won quite a few projects. One of the latest projects gave us 15 PCs. In the framework of another we upgraded the school library and Georgian and English language rooms. We bought books in Russian and Georgian. Afterwards we again won a project and are now planning to set up history and geography rooms” (Interview with an acting school director, Gardabani, Russian school).

Contacts between schools and mass media are rare. Respondents emphasised that school personnel need training in raising funds and forging partnerships independently.

11. Instruction in the general history of religions in school

When discussing the instruction in the general history of religions the emphasis was laid on the following questions: Should the history of religions be part of the national school curriculum? What methodology should be applied to teach the history of religions in school? What kind of a textbook should be published for the subject?

A large number of the respondents agreed that the history of religions should be taught in school. But they put forward different arguments for such studies. A small number of the respondents disagreed – in their opinion, the school is not a proper place to teach the subject. Another small part of the respondents questioned the wisdom of teaching the history of religions as a separate subject, pointing out that as part of the history course the subject was included in the history textbook. Some respondents had no answer.

11.1. Arguments of the proponents of the religious instruction in school

A relatively small number of the proponents of the religious instruction in school deemed it necessary to teach either only the Orthodox faith or the general history of religions with emphasis on the Orthodox Christianity. Part of the proponents insisted that the history of religions must be mandatory, not optional, subject in the curriculum.

“When it comes to religious instruction, only the Orthodox Christianity should be taught in school” (Interview with a teacher, Ajaria).

“We are Orthodox Christians and our children must learn the Bible. We should teach the history of religions too, but it must be a general and short course. Only the Orthodox faith should be studied in depth” (Interview with a teacher, Imereti).

Proponents argued also that such lessons could help other religious denominations to better understand Georgia’s dominant religion. As a result, in their opinion, civil consciousness will strengthen among religious minorities. The latter must understand, in their words, that for the Georgian nation the religion, nationality and ethnic background are intertwined with each other so closely that actually form a whole. The proponents were hopeful that such understanding would urge Muslims and other religious minorities to convert to Orthodox Christianity.

“Only the Orthodox faith should be taught in school. Other religions should not, should they? We used to have a special place in classroom for children to pray but this practice has been abolished for unknown reasons. If our objective is to defeat sects and build a mono-religious society, we must restore these lessons” (Interview with a deputy school director, Kvemo Kartli).

“The history of all major religions must be taught in school but priority should be given to the Orthodox Christianity. This will help convert the Muslims. Islam does not have deep roots in Georgia and such lessons will be very instrumental in converting the Muslim population” (Interview with a teacher, Ajaria).

A large number of the proponents were certain that the lessons in the history of religions should give only general information and the subject must be optional. It must be taught as an element of academic or cultural studies, they argued. No religion should be given a priority and pupils must learn tolerance and respect to all faiths.

“Religion – namely the history of religions – must be an optional subject. I’m a Christian too but I don’t want lessons in school to begin with an Orthodox prayer. There are children from different religious groups in classroom. That is why it must not be a religious instruction but rather academic or theological study” (Interview with a representative of a resource centre, Imereti).

“Religious instruction must be more general than special. It must use simple language to acquaint pupils with major religions and their history. The emphasis should be laid on tolerance. No religion should be given priority” (Interview with a representative of a NGO, Samtskhe-Javakheti).

Part of the respondents thought that the religious instruction should be conducted only in top grades.

“All religions should be taught in school. Christians and Muslims must know each other’s religion – its origins, culture, etc. But religious lessons should be carried out only for top graders as they are already grown-up enough” (Interview with a teacher of biology, Georgian school, Kvemo Kartli).

In the respondents’ opinion, the religious instruction should be given only by trained teachers with respective qualification. Some respondents proposed to teach psychology in school, along with the history of religions. Besides, in their words, school staff must include a psychologist to help settle religious or other tensions should they arise among pupils.

11.2. Arguments of the opponents of the religious instruction in school

A relatively small number of the respondents objected to teaching religion in school. Part of them argued that faith was a private matter and all faith-related problems should be settled out of school. Religious rituals and attributes should have no place in school, they stressed. Others feared that in some schools teachers may lack qualification to teach the subject properly and impartially. In such schools, in their words, the religious instruction may effectively turn into proselytising lessons, which will be very upsetting for pupils from other religious groups. Another argument is that

as there are considerable religious tensions in Georgia nowadays, religious lessons may provoke similar tensions in school.

Representatives of ethnic minorities also disapproved of the religious education in school for fear that poorly trained and unqualified teachers might create problems. They were already such precedents, they emphasised.

“Religion should not be taught in school. If they decide to teach it anyway, the religious instruction must include all major religions: Christianity, Islam, Judaism, etc. All these lessons are important, as they give people insight into other cultures. The more people know about each other’s faith, the more they respect other cultures. But I’m not sure that teachers will be able to teach this subject properly. I’m not convinced that there are properly trained and qualified teachers in our education system. In several cases Azeri pupils of Georgian schools were baptised after these lessons” (Interview with a parent, Kvemo Kartli).

In the opinion of the respondents, advanced studies of the Georgian language can facilitate integration of religious and ethnic minorities better than the religious education does.

“Religious education is not necessary. I think that it would be better to teach pupils the Georgian language extensively rather than the religion” (Interview with a parent, Javakheti).

11.3. The textbook on the history of religions

A majority of the respondents agreed that a textbook on the history of religions should be written and published. Without such a textbook, teachers have a hard job searching for information, preparing lesson plans, etc. Under such circumstances, the religious instruction varies by school and is far from efficient. It seems useful, therefore, to work out a single textbook on the history of religions and apply it in all schools.

Respondents had different opinions on what the new textbook should look like. Those of them who advocated the dominant role of the Orthodox Church maintained that the textbook should lay emphasis on the Orthodox faith since it was the religion of a majority of the country’s population.

Supporters of religious equality insisted that the textbook should be based on the principle of equality, i.e. no religion should be given priority. Besides, in their words, it must be easy to understand, i.e. its language must be simple enough. Part of the respondents suggested that the textbook should be like a history book, while others argued that it must first and foremost address cultural aspects, i.e. explain the essence of religion.

“The textbook should not be about one particular religion. It must teach the history of religions. It must breed tolerance and respect for other cultures in children” (Interview with a teacher, ethnic Georgian, Samtskhe-Javakheti).

“The textbook must be about both history and religion at the same time. It should not include mutual accusations of politicians and historians, as is the case with several current textbooks. We must teach the common history of the Caucasus and major religions of the region: Christianity and Islam. There was a proposal in the past to publish a book on the history of entire Caucasus. Children must know that every religion has positive features” (Interview with a parent, ethnic Azeri, Kvemo Kartli).

Main conclusions

The scope of sampling and results of the survey provide enough data for certain conclusions.

The level of awareness. Different social groups have different levels of awareness of the education reform. Even those involved in the process are not informed better than the others are. They

know that reforms are under way in the education system but they don't have detailed information about separate components of the reform. Rural and non-Georgian schools showed the lowest level of awareness during the survey. The awareness of the reform is low largely because available information is fragmented and incoherent.

Attitudes towards the reform. The idea of the reform is assessed mainly positively (respondents were sure that the reform was indispensable). But the implementation process was widely criticised. A majority of the respondents claimed that the reform was marked by serious irregularities and had little effect in some cases. This is mainly because the reform is carried out in a hurry, without an efficient and coherent strategy and without consultations with main stakeholders (school communities, pupils, teachers, experts). Sometimes, inexperienced and unqualified cadre are put in charge of separate components of the reform. Most of the schools are not technically prepared for the reform. For instance, schools lack computer and other equipment; they have no libraries and employ few trained personnel with respective qualification. That is why the reform process is largely formal in many cases.

The new system of national matriculation exams was assessed mainly positively. Except a few positive remarks, other components of the reform were largely criticised.

National matriculation exams. The new system of national matriculation exams (standardised mandatory tests which replaced the old entry exams run by each university independently) was widely viewed as success. The new system is credited with eliminating corruption and creating fair environment and equal opportunities for all seekers of higher education. What the respondents complained about in this sphere were education fees (which were said to be too high). Besides, respondents from non-Georgian schools were unhappy that the Georgian language test was mandatory for admission to university. Since non-Georgian residents (especially in ethnic enclaves) do not speak Georgian well enough, the number of students from minority groups has dropped substantially in Georgian universities.

School boards. Creation of school boards, as well as the idea of collective management in school, was welcomed by a majority of the respondents. However, a large number of the respondents emphasised that school boards were inefficient, their activities were formal and in many cases the boards were under the thumb of school directors. In many schools directors were able to influence the selection of candidates for school boards – in such schools boards are manned mainly with “directors’ men”. As a result, these boards obediently follow directors’ orders and represent directors’ interests. Members of school boards are not prepared to govern schools independently, since they have neither experience nor qualification for the task. They also are not psychologically ready. A small number of the respondents questioned the wisdom of creating the “new structure”. In their words, former boards of teachers and parents used to deal with schooling problems quite efficiently.

Resource centres. A considerable number of the respondents viewed the resource centres as an intermediate link between the education ministry and schools. Resource centres keep in touch mainly with school directors who act as intermediaries between schools (teachers) and resource centres. Many respondents thought that the main function of resource centres was to supply schools with information. Some respondents had a very vague idea of the functions of resource centres. In their opinion, resource centres were nothing else but control bodies, which must oversee everyday activities of schools. Just the resource centres are responsible for some schooling problems, they said.

Part of the respondents – mainly those who took part in training workshops organised by resource centres – positively evaluated activities of resource centres. Others criticised these bodies for belated delivery of information, interference in school life, and the tendency to influence some processes in school, for instance selection of school personnel.

A small number of the respondents said that the main function of resource centres was to control, just like former Soviet district-level education departments used to do.

Qualification exams for school directors. Respondents had different, mainly critical, attitudes towards these exams. Part of them said it was quite acceptable – and even necessary – to select school directors on the basis of standardised qualification tests. But a large number of the respondents argued that there was no need for such exams. The qualification exams that were carried out two years ago were assessed mainly negatively. A majority of the respondents described the exams as unfair, subjective (the stage of interviews) and inefficient (especially the random selection of schools for nomination of directors – the so-called “lottery”). As a result, in their words, many experienced and qualified directors failed the exams, while less competent candidates were able to succeed only because they managed to impress members of the examination commission during interviews or had relatives among the members. That is why most of the current school directors are no better, if not worse, than their predecessors were.

The exams proved especially hard for candidates from non-Georgian schools. Because of poor Georgian fluency only a few of them managed to pass the exams successfully. As a result, a majority of the non-Georgian schools (and part of the Georgian ones) are governed by acting directors at present. It is an embarrassing situation for the acting directors that prevents them from working efficiently. Part of the respondents emphasised that directors of non-Georgian schools should either come from the same ethnic group or at least speak the respective minority language. A considerable number of the respondents deemed that the director of a school must be selected from this school’s personnel. Some respondents said that directors should be appointed by the education ministry without any exams.

Qualification exams for school teachers. A majority of the respondents approved of the idea of such exams (tests in subject-specific and professional skills). At the same time, however, they insisted that the education ministry should arrange free training and preparatory courses for school teachers before the exams. Part of the respondents were not happy with the proposed examination, feeling sure that the exams would be ineffective and unjust. They reminded that such exams were carried out in the past but their results made little difference. Some respondents suggested that it would be more reasonable to train and retrain teachers before testing their skills. Teachers of non-Georgian schools are especially concerned with the coming exams. They fear that if the exams are in Georgian, they will certainly fail and may lose their jobs as a result.

The voucher-based funding and optimisation of schools. A majority of the respondents said they generally knew these new elements of schooling. When asked to elaborate, however, they were unable to provide respective details and mechanisms. Although the respondents had largely general information, their opinions were mostly critical. Nevertheless, the underlying idea of the per-pupil voucherisation was assessed positively by a majority of the respondents. But they stressed that without proper implementation the new funding scheme would be hardly acceptable. A large number of the respondents were certain that the voucherisation had led to inequality among schools. Namely, in their words, different schools (big and small, urban and rural) do not get adequate funds. As to the optimisation process (the merger of several schools into one), it has created problems for both teachers and pupils, especially in rural areas, as they now have to walk long distances to reach their school. The education process is hampered as a result.

Teachers cannot accept and understand why after the new funding scheme was enforced, they are paid less than they used to get in the past, even though the number of pupils in classroom has increased. Representatives of rural schools claimed that the voucherisation and optimisation policies were ill-advised and inappropriate for rural schools. The optimisation was said to be especially “dangerous” for mountainous communities, as it may boost migration and many mountainous villages will be deserted as a result. It was emphasised that the government’s promise – a school bus service – was unavailable in practice.

Changes in the education process. Alternative textbooks, new teaching methodologies and the school curriculum, integrated teaching and trimester-based education process, 12-year compulsory secondary education, bilingual education in non-Georgian schools and other innovations triggered considerable controversy and drew a lot of criticism. Many respondents emphasised that these reforms were inefficient because they were implemented in a hurry, without proper preparation and consultation with schools. It is noteworthy that non-Georgian schools encountered more problems as a result of these reforms than Georgian ones did.

The teaching of the history of religions. A majority of the respondents agreed that the history of religions should be taught in school, provided all religions are given equal attention without any bias and propaganda. To this end, in the respondents' opinion, it is necessary to publish respective textbooks and "grow" tolerant teachers with adequate training and qualification.

A small number of the respondents objected to the religious instruction in school because, in their words, faith was a private matter and all faith-related problems should be settled out of school. Other arguments of the opponents include the lack of qualified teachers for teaching the subject and negative past experience when some pupils encountered problems at religious lessons because of their religion. Some respondents warned that discussions over religious matters in school could lead to conflicts in classroom.

